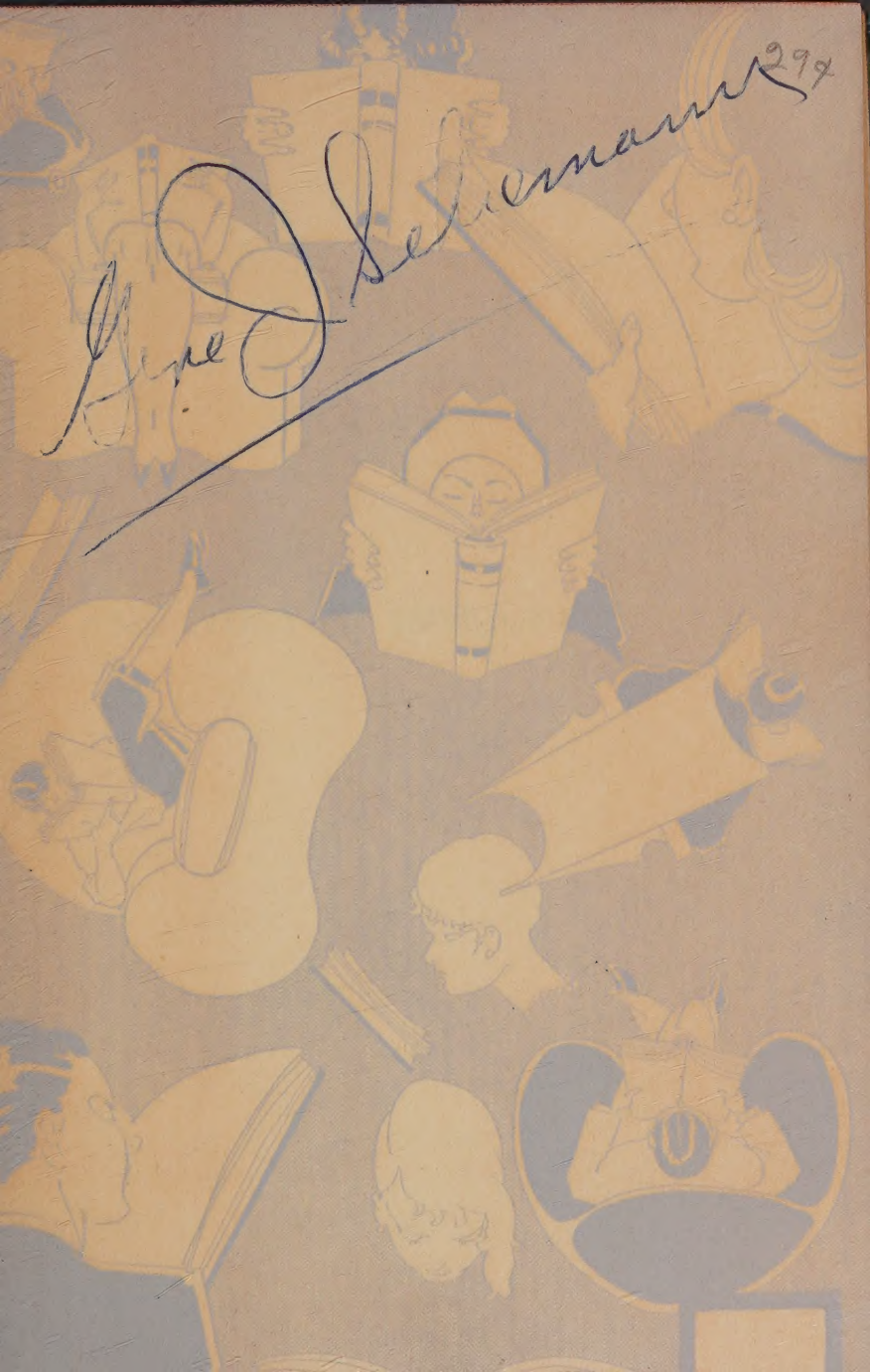


Gene Schumann 297



THE COAST OF INTRIGUE

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By
WHITMAN CHAMBERS

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NEW YORK

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Printed in the United States of America
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THE COMMERCIAL BOOKBINDING CO.
CLEVELAND, OHIO

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CHAPTER I

BOB ATWELL leaned back in his deck chair and watched the low shore line slip slowly by. The afternoon was hot and sultry; there was no breeze save that occasioned by the movement of the little tramp steamer—and ten knots was little better than no breeze at all. The sea was blue, a deep tropic blue, and glassy smooth. The *Mazatlan* rolled slowly to the long ground swell.

Atwell's dark eyes, scanning the shore line, were as eager as a boy's. Condota! Andegoya! South America! These were magic names to him who had spent twenty-eight years in the placer fields of California. His earliest playground had been a gold dredger on the Yuba. As he looked back over the years, it seemed that he had never been out of sight nor earshot of one of the big boats. Their ceaseless din, the roar of their bucket lines and the rattle of rocks on their tailing piles was sheer music to him.

From bank man to oiler, from oiler to winchman, from winchman to dredgemaster, from dredgemaster

to superintendent—so he had mounted the rungs of the ladder. And now, within a few days, he was to climb to the topmost rung; he was to become an independent operator of a platinum dredger.

Platinum! A magic word! A metal worth nearly ten times as much as gold! Small wonder, then, that there was an eager light in his keen brown eyes, that he could hardly wait for the little tramp steamer to drop her anchor inside the bar at Condota!

The shore line at last gave way to a small indentation that marked the mouth of the Condota River. Two miles away, dim in the haze of dancing heat waves, Atwell made out the sprawling city of Condota. Apparently lifeless it lay, drab, squalid, uninviting, in a little pocket in the hills. Far from alluring, to another it might have been repelling. But to Bob Atwell, after three weeks aboard the *Mazatlan*, it was a more than welcome sight.

There was a clang of bells below decks and the little steamer's throbbing engines slowed. Came a hail from the starboard side and, swinging his chair about, Atwell saw the dirty sails of the pilot boat close aboard. A moment later a swarthy South American, clad in a make-shift uniform of soiled white duck, clambered up the sea ladder and made his way officiously to the bridge.

"Well, another half hour and we'll be ashore."

The speaker, who dropped into a chair beside Atwell, was a rather prepossessing man of thirty-five or so. His tanned face, with its closely clipped

mustache, was strong, although a trifle hard, particularly about the mouth. He was very tall and very straight, almost commanding. Although, for some unaccountable reason, Atwell had taken an immediate dislike to the man, he had tried to appear friendly toward him during the long trip down the coast from San Francisco—just as he might have been friendly toward a cellmate in a prison. And now, with their destination almost reached, he saw no reason why he should not keep up the pretense. After all, he had no just grounds for disliking James Hackwood. And, too, it was foolish to start off in a new country by making an enemy.

"It won't be any too soon to suit me," the younger man answered the other's remark.

"Eager to get on the job, are you?" the tall man smiled.

"Very. I'm as bad as a kid waiting for the last day of school," Atwell laughed. "The last three weeks have got on my nerves."

"You and I together," Hackwood grinned good-naturedly. "I suppose your partner will meet you in Condota."

Atwell nodded. "I cabled him I'd be in with the rest of our dredge machinery on the *Mazatlan*. He's been down here for two months, you know, getting the dredge together. I'm bringing down the winches and the last of the machinery for it. We only have about two months left in which to get to work, according to the terms of our concession."

Hackwood nodded thoughtfully, his eyes on the squalid town toward which their boat was steaming under a slow bell.

"What did you say your partner's name is?" he asked quietly.

"Cunningham. Shorty Cunningham. He's rather well known down here in Andegoya, I believe. He's been here for years, off and on."

"Yes. I've met him."

There was something in the other's tone, some vague shade of reticence, that caused Atwell to glance at him sharply. The man's eyes, however, were still on the town; they revealed nothing. Atwell wondered. After a time, thinking to draw the other out, he remarked:

"I don't know Cunningham very well. In fact, I was only with him for two weeks. He bought this platinum concession on the Condota River—paid thirty thousand dollars for it—and came to the States to raise money to buy a dredger. Cunningham had been in partnership with my father years ago and he started to look him up, not knowing that he has been dead for five years. He got in touch with me and I managed to raise the money. We bought a second-hand dredger and shipped it down here. We should have it working inside of a month."

"Well, I certainly wish you the best of luck," Hackwood said earnestly. Deliberately or involuntarily, Atwell did not know which, there was a suggestion of doubt in the man's manner. What had

caused it, the young man asked himself? Did Hackwood know Cunningham? Did he know that the mining man was not trustworthy?

For a moment Atwell felt a vague uneasiness creeping over him. Every cent he had in the world was tied up in this venture. If Cunningham proved to be crooked— But he hastily put aside the thought. Cunningham was all right. He'd stake every thing he had on his partner's integrity—indeed, that was exactly what he had done.

And this man Hackwood wasn't going to sow any seeds of suspicion in his mind about Cunningham, either. He had been suspicious of Hackwood himself from the first, for that matter. To the casual observer, the man seemed all right. But there was something about his eyes, some vague disinclination to meet the gaze of another, that Atwell did not like. Hackwood's eyes were not shifty; it wasn't that exactly—still, there was something about them that had put Atwell on his guard, made him suspect that Hackwood was not the honorable mahogany operator he pretended to be.

The *Mazatlan* ran the bar in safety and dropped her anchor a quarter of a mile from the shore.

"They won't allow us to tie up to the dock until to-morrow. Quarantine regulations," Hackwood remarked. He rose from his chair. "We are privileged to go ashore, however. Coming, Atwell?"

"No, I think I shall stay aboard until Cunningham shows up," the other answered. "I suppose he

is in town and will come right out. I don't know much about things down here and he will have to make the arrangements for getting our machinery up the river. If I landed I might miss him."

Hackwood laughed, all but his strange gray eyes.

"From the way you talked, I thought you wouldn't waste a minute getting ashore. I know that for my part I've seen enough of this dirty tub. Better come over the side with me. There's a good hotel in town. A regular meal and a few cool drinks should go pretty well after three weeks of this stuff. I'll be glad to take you around and show you the town. Better come along."

"Thanks," Atwell shook his head. "I'll wait until Cunningham shows up."

Hackwood hesitated; then he shrugged and strode off down the deck toward his cabin. Atwell watched him go, wonderingly. Something told him that there was more than casual friendliness behind the tall mahogany operator's invitation. Hackwood had impressed him all along as not being entirely sincere. Now, particularly, he sensed that the man had been actuated by some other motive than mere sociability.

What was that motive? Indeed, why should James Hackwood, reputed to be one of the biggest exporters of mahogany in the Republic of Andegoya, take any interest in him at all?

Atwell rose from his chair and took a turn up and down the deck. The hot steel burned through the soles of his shoes and he finally climbed the ladder

to the after deckhouse and went into his cabin. Not a breath of air was stirring. The little cubbyhole was like a furnace. Yet Atwell dropped onto his berth and relaxed, grappling with his problem.

Five minutes passed, during which no solution presented itself. Then he heard footsteps on the deck outside. He recognized instantly the short mincing steps of the fat skipper, José Munoz. Then a low voice came to his ears. It was Hackwood's. The man spoke in Spanish. Atwell caught only a single sentence.

"Nosotros tenemos que echarlo del vapor!"

Atwell repeated the sentence slowly to himself. His Spanish, learned in high school, was not too fluent despite the fact that he had spent the last three weeks brushing up in it. Yet he was able to translate that single sentence.

"We will have to get him off the ship!"

Whom did Hackwood have in mind when he had made that declaration to Munoz? Atwell smiled grimly. To whom but himself could he have referred? Hackwood certainly had not been talking about a member of the crew. And there were no other passengers aboard.

"H-m. Rather an odd situation," Atwell reflected. "Now why in the name of common sense does Hackwood want to get me off the ship? And what interest has the captain got in me? H-m. I certainly wish Shorty Cunningham would put in an appearance."

CHAPTER II

"HE is a hard-headed young fool, José," James Hackwood remarked shortly to the captain of the *Mazatlan*. "I knew that the minute I set eyes on him. I am afraid we are going to have trouble with him."

An hour had passed, an hour of bustle and confusion, with the port authorities swarming over the decks and delving into matters that did not concern them. Now they had gone. The *Mazatlan* swung quietly at her anchor. But Captain José Munoz was still in an unpleasant mood. Port authorities always irked him. He was a short man, very fat, with beady black eyes set in a round moon-face. Impatiently he filled two glasses with whisky and handed one of them to Hackwood. Then he dropped onto the transom at the side of his cabin and rubbed a pudgy hand over his greasy forehead.

Hackwood drained his glass at a gulp. The captain sipped his liquor slowly, staring at his companion through half-closed, resentful eyes.

"Why bother me about him?" he demanded, speaking in Spanish as Hackwood had done. "In another hour it will be dark. One of my quartermasters is very handy with a knife. Why not pay him fifty dollars and get our young friend out of the way for good and all?"

Hackwood scowled and dropped into a chair, hoisting his feet to the table.

"José, you are impossible," he remarked disgustedly. "Do you not remember that at least twenty of Atwell's friends saw him off in San Francisco? If they do not hear from him, what will happen? There will be an investigation, of course. Your master's ticket is not any too secure as it is. One more shady job and you will lose it. Not that I give a hang about that, but we need you right now and cannot afford any kind of an investigation. Murder is foolhardy at all times, José, and it is particularly foolhardy at a time like this when we must play our cards carefully."

The fat shoulders shrugged; Munoz took another sip of liquor.

"An entry in the log. Storm. Lost at sea."

"Yes. A fine explanation. Particularly after the port authorities have just looked over the log and no report has been made of any one lost at sea. No, that is quite out of the question, José."

"Get him drunk," Munoz suggested with another shrug of his ponderous shoulders.

"But the fool doesn't drink," Hackwood objected testily.

"Think it out for yourself then. It is not my affair anyway. I am going ashore now to arrange for the launches. At midnight I shall be back with them. We can have them loaded by four, when the

tide is high enough for them to slip out over the bar. Atwell—I shall leave him to you.”

“Very kind of you, I am sure, Señor El Capitan,” Hackwood remarked drily, rising from his chair. “I shall see what I can do with him.”

Hackwood passed out of the cabin and paced slowly down the narrow deck. His eyes were on the town of Condota. The air was beginning to grow cooler; the town would soon awaken. There was a comfortable hotel there, fairly good food, cooling drinks, music in the plaza—and a certain young woman whom he wanted very much to see. And yet he faced an unfinished task aboard the *Mazatlan*; a hard-headed young American must in some way be forced to go ashore. How could the trick be turned?

Hackwood suddenly smiled, nodded reassuringly to himself and strode into his cabin. Opening his suitcase, he pulled out a sheet of letter paper and an envelope and sat down at the small table. “Dear Bob,” he wrote, and then shook his head.

“No. That won’t do,” he mused. “I don’t know whether Cunningham would call him ‘Bob’ or ‘Mr. Atwell.’ Besides, I don’t know what the old man’s handwriting is like and Atwell probably does.”

Getting another sheet of paper, he started again. This time he wrote:

“Mr. Atwell—Shorty Cunningham has asked me to tell you that he has been called up the river and will not be able to meet you until morning. He wishes you to take a room at the Hotel de la Plaza

and wait for him there." Hackwood paused, and then signed the first name that came into his head: "Edward Templeton."

Sealing the note and addressing it to Robert Atwell, Hackwood called a mess attendant and ordered him to deliver it to the other passenger with the information that it had just been brought out from town. He waited five minutes, by his watch, and then walked down the deck to Atwell's cabin and knocked on the door.

"Come in," came the younger man's voice.

Hackwood opened the door and strode nonchalantly into the cabin.

"I just thought I'd drop in and say good-bye, Atwell," the tall man smiled disarmingly. "I am going ashore now and may not see you again soon. I shall probably be going up the river in the morning."

Atwell was still holding the note that the mess attendant had delivered to him. He glanced at it for a moment without reply. Was the young fool suspicious, Hackwood asked himself? How could he be? Still, to all outward appearances he seemed to be weighing its authenticity. But when Atwell finally glanced up, there was decision in his cool brown eyes. He rose to his feet.

"I've changed my mind, Hackwood," he smiled. "I will go ashore with you after all. Another night aboard this ship is more than I can stomach. Can you wait a few minutes until I pack my bag?"

"Gladly. I'll meet you on the forward well deck."

The tall figure passed out of the stateroom. Atwell's lips twisted in a faint smile as he watched him go. His face clouded, however, as he glanced again at the note in his hand. Then he shrugged, crumpled it into a ball and tossed it into the corner. It was a ruse, of course, he told himself.

"Something is up," he mused. "A blind man could see that. And yet I'm so blamed green that I haven't the faintest idea of what it's all about. But I guess the only way to find out is to go ashore with our mysterious friend. So here goes."

The town of Condota was squalid, indescribably dirty. Small, ramshackle shops and warehouses crowded against each other, apparently for mutual support, on either side of the narrow, cobbled streets. Natives, scantily clad, lounged in the shady places. Children and dogs thronged the streets. A profusion of odors, as unrecognizable as they were unpleasant, assailed his nostrils. Atwell's lips tightened as he walked along beside his tall companion. If this were a fair sample of the Republic of Andegoya, he almost wished he had stayed in California.

But, as with cities the world over, Condota put its worst foot forward. As they progressed up the main street, the buildings gradually became more impressive, the streets less dirty, the smells less offensive. The big plaza, with its palms and tropical shrubs and tinkling fountains was quite inviting.

And the hotel was a pleasant surprise. It was a large rambling structure, two stories in height and built in the Spanish mission style. The room which was assigned to Atwell looked over the sea.

The palm-fringed dining room in which they ordered dinner was cool and inviting with its fresh linen and sparkling silver and dim lights.

"Quite a change from the saloon on the old *Mazatlan*," Hackwood smiled as the waiter came up to them. "This hotel is one in a thousand. You won't find many on the west coast of South America as good as this. Rich town, Condota. Progressive, too. Untold resources, Atwell; absolutely untold. Mahogany, platinum, gold. The *Choco*, as we call the jungle up the river, is one of the richest sections in the world. All it needs is the money to develop it. Money and initiative and daring. You've got to have them all, Atwell, if you expect to get ahead in this country."

Hackwood broke off to order their dinner. After the waiter had departed, Atwell's host rose and excused himself.

"Back in a moment. A little business that I must attend to."

Atwell's eyes half closed as he watched the tall form stride across the room and disappear into the lobby. What was he up to? What in the name of common sense was the man's game? Something underhanded was going on. Just what it could be was more than Atwell could even conjecture.

Of course, Cunningham had warned him that there might be trouble. The concession that he had acquired was worth a small fortune. Other interests had been out to get it and the mere fact that it had been awarded to Cunningham did not mean that their efforts would cease. But what motive could impel any one, Hackwood for example, to hasten his departure from the *Mazatlan*?

While these thoughts were running through his mind and while he was considering an inclination to bolt from the dining room and go back to the *Mazatlan*, he saw a man and a woman enter the dining room. Singly either one was more than enough to compel the attention of an observer. Together they formed as striking a couple as Atwell had ever seen.

The man was tall, fully as tall as Hackwood, and walked with the military bearing and grace of a soldier. Obviously a native Andegoyan, or other South American, his features displayed none of the mingling of negro blood which Atwell had already learned was almost a universal characteristic of the peoples south of the Canal. His nose was straight and aquiline, his black eyes piercing, his forehead high, his lips firm and strong despite a slight suggestion of cruelty and ruthlessness. Across the left breast of his spotless white uniform were a half dozen medals.

His companion was under thirty, tall, as graceful in her movements as a lioness. She wore a tight fitting black gown which accentuated the unusual white-

ness of her skin. Her eyes were large, black, languorous; her lips were full and exquisitely chiseled. Her black shining hair was worn straight back from her forehead and was adorned with a long, curving comb of ivory. Standing in the doorway of the dining room, gazing languidly from table to table, she made a most compelling picture.

Atwell's eyes were still on the couple and he was wondering vaguely who they might be, when he saw Hackwood hurry up behind them and tap the man on the shoulder. The tall native turned, his face lighted and he shook hands warmly with the American. The woman, too, extended her hand to Hackwood. For several moments they stood talking. Then, motioning toward his table, Hackwood led the way across the dining room. Atwell rose.

"My two best friends in Andegoya," Hackwood explained with a warm smile. "Señorita de Rico, Mr. Atwell."

The girl's eyes met Atwell's. Warm, they were, and vaguely provocative. The hand she extended was slender, graceful. Atwell clasped it only for an instant but in that brief space he felt strongly the powerful magnetism of her personality. No ordinary young woman was this, he told himself, half breathlessly. No indeed, here was beauty as pure and fresh as desert rain—power to sway kingdoms—strength of character—vitality.

CHAPTER III

HALF dazedly, in halting, high school Spanish, Atwell acknowledged Hackwood's introduction. With his words the woman's lips curved in the most delicate of smiles; a momentary flash of pearly, even teeth.

"I am very glad to make your acquaintance, Señor Atwell," she said, in the mellowest of contralto voices.

The young man flushed hotly—might have known a woman of her type would speak English!

"And, this, Atwell," Hackwood went on with the introductions, "is Señor Xavier Juarte, the *entendente* of Condota. In the States you would call him the governor."

Atwell shook hands with the *entendente*—a strong handclasp, a faintly whimsical smile on Juarte's lips, a steady penetrating gaze from piercing black eyes.

"Señorita de Rico and the *entendente* have honored us," Hackwood went on grandly, "by consenting to take dinner with us. I knew you would like to meet them, Atwell."

"Indeed, it is a great pleasure," that young man responded.

"Atwell is a partner of Shorty Cunningham's," Hackwood went on to explain to the *entendente* as they seated themselves. "They have taken over a platinum concession up the river, I believe."

Juarteز nodded gravely.

"I am very well acquainted with Cunningham," he remarked, in perfect English. "In fact, I awarded him the very concession he is going to work. It is very rich; very rich, indeed. You are fortunate, Señor Atwell. That concession will make you a rich man, richer than you have ever dreamed. If only I had had the money to bring in a dredger of my own!" He waved his long tapering hands in an expressive gesture of resignation. "Alas, it is the same with all my countrymen. Boundless resources we have, but no capital to exploit them. We are compelled to stand idly by while the Americans, the English, the Germans develop our great land."

As Atwell half expected, when he saw the trend of the other's conversation, Juarteز could not keep a certain bitterness from creeping into his voice. Atwell had been warned of this attitude on the part of the native Andegoyans. And, in a way, he resented it. After all, if Americans and Englishmen and Germans were willing to risk their money in a foreign land, why should they not reap a profit? The risk, surely, was theirs. And from all the tales he had heard of South America, particularly of the West Coast, the risk was certainly great enough to justify huge profits. He had no opportunity to give voice to his thoughts, however, even had he been so inclined. Hackwood took up the conversation, in much the same manner that Atwell himself might have done.

"You must admit, your excellency, that our enter-

prises down here are not what we in America would call sure-thing propositions. There is a great element of chance. Suppose, for instance, that Andegoya should become torn by revolution. What, then, would happen to our investments here?"

"Nonsense, señor!" The *entendente* shrugged his broad shoulders deprecatingly. "We have not had a revolution in ten years. President Quilla is a most able and respected man. . . ."

The talk went on, chiefly between Juartez and Hackwood. Commonplace for the most part, touching on many and varied subjects, Atwell nevertheless sensed a vague undercurrent of irony. Hidden meanings. Significant glances. An air of mystery and intrigue. He wondered if it might be only his imagination, if he saw these things solely because he had been expecting them.

So absorbed did he become with these speculations, that he was halfway through his dinner before he recalled that his own presence there was under peculiar circumstances. He knew now with definite certainty that Hackwood had deliberately conspired to get him off the *Mazatlan*. And again the question: why? What interest had Hackwood in him? Why should this influential and prepossessing mahogany operator interest himself in the affairs of a junior partner in a dredging enterprise?

Throughout the balance of the meal, while he talked more or less constrainedly with Señorita de Rico of his work in the gold fields of California, these

questions were racing unanswered through the back of his mind. In a way, he regretted his haste in leaving the ship. He had come on impulse, more than anything else. Sensing that Hackwood wanted him to leave, he had felt that his departure might hasten a solution of the mystery. Now, more than anything else he wished he were back in his stuffy cabin aboard the *Mazatlan*.

Despite the intriguing presence of Señorita de Rico, and the extremely pleasant consciousness that she seemed interested in him and his work, the dinner dragged along slowly. His companions ate sparingly of the many courses that were set before them, but with exasperating lack of haste. Their manner seemed to tell him plainly that the whole evening was before them, that there was no more enjoyable way of passing the time and that a few hours more or less spent at the table were by no means wasted.

Patiently Atwell resigned himself to the inevitable. Coming from a country where the average person sits down to the table only to satisfy his hunger and is up and on his way again as soon as possible, this dallying irked him immeasurably. But he knew better than to say anything or even to attempt to excuse himself. Such an action would be construed as little short of an insult to the *entendente* and his beautiful companion. And Atwell knew enough of South America to know that the success of his whole enterprise depended on keeping in the good graces of all and sundry officials whom he chanced to meet.

Señorita de Rico's personality, he found, as he grew better acquainted with her, was even more captivating than her beauty. She was charming in every sense of the word. But underneath her charm and her singular beauty he sensed that there were hidden fires, fires that waited only the slightest provocation to burst into flame. A bit of the tigress, this young woman, passionate, ruthless. Her voice, her glance, her very presence, set his nerves to tingling.

He hoped that in the months to come he would grow better acquainted with the Señorita de Rico. Hoped, yes, and feared, too. There was something awesome about her, he felt vaguely. Not only charm and beauty and freshness and vitality; these were obvious qualities. But there was some unknown power that, used for good, might work miracles; and used for evil might kill as ruthlessly as a tigress. Ruthlessness! Yes, that was the word, though it seemed almost a sacrilege to apply it to this Madonna-like creature. Yet it fitted her, undeniably. What powers were hers! What powers to love—and to hate! He hoped that he might never incur her enmity. Her love—well, the thought was a little staggering and quite presumptuous.

It was after nine before they left the table; another half hour before Juarte and Señorita de Rico had said their good-byes and departed to keep an engagement at the home of some government official.

"It has made me very happy to meet you," was the young woman's adieu to Atwell, spoken in the

quaint way that was peculiar to her. For an instant she held him under the spell of her dazzling eyes; then her long lashes half veiled them as she added: "I hope it will be my pleasure to see you again."

Although he was conscious of Juartez' cool glance, Atwell nevertheless met her compliment in kind.

"The pleasure has been all mine, Señorita de Rico. Nothing could make me happier than to see you again—and soon."

Flashing him a most entrancing smile, she took the governor's arm and started toward the door. She glanced back once. And this time her eyes were for no one but Hackwood. She smiled faintly at the mahogany magnate, a smile that was oddly enigmatical. Hackwood caught her look and a strange light came into his eyes. Was it jealousy, bitterness, pique?

Atwell did not know. Certain it was, however, that Hackwood was on more than familiar terms with Señorita de Rico. And it was almost equally certain that he both respected and feared the *entendete*.

The young man smiled to himself. South American duplicity; Latin intrigue! Something was in the wind. It always was in these smaller South American republics, he had been told. He sensed it in the soft, languorous air that wafted in through the open windows, in the fragments of Spanish that came to his ears from the various guests who thronged the lobby,

in the typically Latin-American atmosphere that pervaded the whole city.

Atwell wondered with quickening pulse if he would ever become involved in it. He hoped, for his own well being, that he would not. But he knew, even as he was conscious of the reckless fire of youth that coursed through his veins, that he could not become a part of this republic for long and still keep out of it.

"Beautiful, isn't she?" Hackwood's words were almost inaudible, so absorbed was Atwell in his own musings. "Quite a romance connected with Dolores de Rico."

Atwell looked up at this. "Yes?" he questioned politely.

"She was raised by old Juan de Rico and his wife. Very high class people. One of the few pure-blooded Spanish families in the country. Both dead now, however. Dolores was about six months old when she was taken into the family. According to the tale, Dolores' mother and father were unfortunate lovers whose parents frowned upon their marriage. Often happens down here, you know, where the parents make the matches. These two lovers didn't care for their parents' matchmaking, so they ran away and got married, quite as an American couple would do.

"However, there seems to have been something faulty about the marriage. Girl was under age or something. Anyway, her folks found them after

about two years of searching, took the mother and the baby away and had the marriage annulled. The baby was given to the de Ricos to Raise. And they did a good job of it, as you may see. Incidentally left her a small fortune when they died."

"And her mother and father—were they ever united?" Atwell asked, only mildly interested.

"Oh, no! The mother killed herself a year or two afterward. For that matter, no one even knows who Dolores' parents were. The whole affair was kept very secret, of course. It would never have come out at all if old Juan de Rico hadn't got a bit talkative just before he died. Mind was wandering a bit, I guess. However, he never did tell who the mother and father were. Carried the secret to his grave."

Hackwood paused and then, locking his arm in Atwell's, went on hospitably:

"Well, what can I offer you now? There is the inevitable band concert in the plaza. The music, however, is abominable. There is a motion picture theater in town, but the best people don't patronize it. Really, there is very little in the way of excitement to offer you."

"That suits me exactly," Atwell returned with some enthusiasm. "Excitement is the last thing in the world that I am looking for. That trip down the coast tired me out. I don't know why it should, with nothing to do all day long, but it certainly did. I am quite willing to call it a night and go to bed."

"Suit yourself, old man," the other returned genially. "I don't know but what I'll hit the hay myself before long."

Atwell thanked his host for his hospitality and kindness, bade him good night, and walked over to the desk for the key to his room. He pocketed it and glanced over his shoulder to assure himself that Hackwood had not followed him across the lobby. Then he addressed a question to the clerk.

"Is Edward Templeton in the hotel?" It was the name that had been signed to the note bidding him come ashore.

"Edward Templeton?" the clerk repeated with a shake of his head. "We have no such guest, señor."

"Have you ever heard of a man by that name in Andegoya?"

"No, señor. The name is unfamiliar."

"Very well. Thank you."

So he guessed aright, after all. The note had been a ruse, probably written by Hackwood himself. Atwell went up to his room and dropped onto the bed, without removing his clothes or turning out the light.

What was Hackwood's game? he asked himself for the hundredth time since coming ashore. Suddenly he recalled a remark of Juarte's at dinner. The *entendante* had wished that he had had a dredger to work on the concession that he had sold to Cunningham. Atwell sat bolt upright. There was a clew. Hackwood and Juarte, working together, intended

to steal their dredge machinery from the *Mazatlan*. That was Hackwood's reason for getting him off the ship.

Still, that wasn't exactly logical. The machinery that he had brought down from San Francisco on the *Mazatlan* was only a small part of a dredger. Without the other parts it would be useless. And he knew that Shorty Cunningham had the other parts safely transported up the river and assembled. Of course, Juarte and Hackwood might have gained possession of them in some way. But that was hardly plausible. The country wasn't as lawless as all that.

No, there must be some other explanation of Hackwood's unwonted interest in him. And he knew that there was only one way to find that out, and that was to go back aboard the *Mazatlan*. Rising from the bed, he removed an automatic pistol from his bag and slipped it into his pocket. Then he walked calmly out into the dimly lighted hall and made his way toward the back of the hotel.

CHAPTER IV

As he had expected, there was a rear entrance to the hostelry and he soon found himself in a dark alley behind the building. It was an eerie place, this alley in an unknown town of a strange country. From all about him came the myriad sounds of the city: the faint blare of the band in the plaza, the metallic twang of a guitar in a nearby building, the raucous call of a street vendor, the plaintive crying of a baby.

Atwell felt oddly alone and friendless as he made his way out of the side street and down along the main thoroughfare toward the waterfront. It wasn't exactly homesickness; for years he had not known the meaning of a home. Rather it was merely an unusual depression, unusual because his spirit was not one easily depressed.

The atmosphere of this strange city seemed tense with menace. The darkness; the deep shadows of the squalid buildings that lined the lower section of the street; the slow-moving, almost stealthy natives he encountered; the warm, humid air he breathed—everything conspired to dampen his spirits and fill him with uncertainty and foreboding.

He wasn't afraid. It wasn't that, exactly. So far as he knew, there was nothing as yet to be afraid of. But the feeling persisted, even grew apace as he

neared the docks. Angry a bit, he took a firmer grip on himself—and on the automatic in his pocket. He wished Cunningham had met him, as he had cabled him to do. Where was the old man, anyway? Why the devil hadn't he shown up, as he had agreed?

Atwell was in an unpleasant frame of mind when he reached the dark gloom of the docks. His nervousness had almost got the better of him. Every shadow seemed to be peopled with crouching forms. A dozen times he felt an inclination to glance over his shoulder; he could almost feel the presence of some one close behind him. But he put it down resolutely. No one had observed him leave the hotel. He had taken precious care to see to that. And he had most certainly not been followed through the town.

In the shadow of one of the ramshackle warehouses on the dock he found a watchman. Mustering his best Spanish, he asked where he might find a boat to take him out into the harbor. The man regarded him curiously, not to say suspiciously, for a moment before he answered.

"There are no boats to be had at this time, señor," he told Atwell at last.

"But I must get out there!"

"I am very sorry, señor. What ship does the señor wish to board?"

On the point of replying that it didn't make a damned bit of difference what ship he wished to board, Atwell realized that his Spanish was not quite

fluent enough for such an emphatic retort. Instead he merely said:

"I must board one of the ships out in the harbor immediately. Surely you can help me get a launch. I will give you ten dollars if you find me one."

But the watchman shook his head hopelessly.

"I would do much for ten dollars, señor, but that I cannot do. In the morning—"

"The morning will be too late. I must have a boat now." And then, as an afterthought: "In the morning my ship will have sailed."

"No ship is leaving the harbor to-night, señor. It is impossible to cross the bar except at high tide. That will be at six to-morrow morning. By that time a boat could be arranged."

Atwell saw it was useless to argue the matter further. Apparently there were no boats to be had at that time of night; either that or this man was disinclined to tell him where he could get one.

"Very well," he said shortly. "I shall have to wait until morning."

Turning, he started up the street toward the center of the town. He walked only a block, however. Then he slipped into the shadows and swung back toward the docks. Moored to another pier, a hundred yards from where he had talked to the watchman, Atwell found a small skiff. He hesitated a moment as he regarded it. To take it would be stealing, of course. No, it would just be borrowing. He

would see to it that it was returned in the morning and would pay the owner for the use of it.

Dropping to his knees, he swung down over the edge of the dock and dropped into the boat. The oars lay across the thwarts. Shipping them quietly, he untied the painter. The tide was still ebbing, enough to carry the skiff noiselessly away from the dock. Atwell waited, without dipping his oars. The boat drifted with exasperating slowness. Finally, when he was fifty feet from the dock, he bent to the oars. A half mile away, where he had carefully remarked her position that afternoon, he made out faintly the riding lights of the *Mazatlan*. He headed toward them with a smooth, powerful stroke.

He had rowed less than a hundred feet when he heard a babble of voices on the dock. In the faint moonlight he saw the running form of the watchman and, close behind him, the tattered uniforms of two *soldados*, the police officers of the city. A shrill challenge rang out across the water. He did not catch the words, but he recognized their portent readily enough. "Halt" sounds the same in almost any language.

Atwell debated an instant, still bending to the oars. He was in an unpleasant situation, if not in actual danger. He had been caught in the act of stealing a boat; and somewhere he had heard that larceny is a rather serious offense in South America, particularly when committed by an American. For him to turn back to the dock would result in his immediate

arrest. If he kept on rowing—well, there was a chance that he might elude them.

He glanced quickly over his shoulder. The moon was on the horizon. Another five minutes and the harbor would be in darkness. A heavy tropical mist was drifting in from the sea. That, too, would help him. There was little to gain by going back, and much to lose. He quickened his stroke resolutely. If they wanted him, let them come and get him!

The shouting continued. Atwell caught the word "shoot."

"Shoot and be damned to you!" he growled under his breath, and threw every ounce of his strength onto the oars.

He felt little fear in disregarding the threat of the *soldados*. Their marksmanship was notoriously poor. Besides, he knew that not even a crack shot could shoot over water in moonlight with any degree of accuracy. So when the first shot rang out, echoing against the darkened warehouses, he felt little trepidation, only a cool contempt for officers who would waste ammunition on such an uncertain target.

He rowed steadily, unmindful of the shots that plopped into the water around him. Gradually the figures on the pier merged into the darkness of the buildings behind them. The firing ceased. The moon sank swiftly below the horizon. Save for the hazy, distant lights of the city and the lights of the half dozen ships which swung at anchor in the bay, utter darkness shrouded the harbor, a darkness so

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complete that Atwell could barely see the stern of the skiff.

The water was glassy smooth; it was not difficult to row noiselessly. Once the dock and the *soldados* were blotted out by the darkness, Atwell settled to a slower stroke. He knew that it would not be wise to approach the *Mazatlan* too soon. The anchor watch had undoubtedly heard the sound of the shots and might be awake. Better to let them go back to sleep, for sleeping on duty was only one of the many weaknesses of the crew of the *Mazatlan*.

Half an hour passed before he approached the ship. It loomed out of the darkness at last, silent, ghostly, lifeless as far as he could see. He swung in under the stern, reconnoitering cautiously. No one hailed him. He felt certain that, even had a lookout been on watch, he would have been unobserved in the darkness. Pushing cautiously out from under the overhanging stern, he rowed slowly to the sea ladder on the starboard quarter.

He hesitated an instant, undecided whether to secure the skiff or cast it adrift. Then, making up his mind, he swung up onto the sea ladder and let the boat go. Better not taking any chances of its giving away his presence; easy enough to look up the owner to-morrow and pay him for it.

Climbing the ladder, he peered cautiously over the railing and up and down the deck. Although there was a light in the captain's cabin, none of the crew was in sight. As he gained the deck and headed

aft toward his own cabin, he heard the hiss of escaping steam from the cargo winches and knew that the ship had not been secured for the night. The hatches on the after well deck, too, were open. Something was afoot. What it was or how it concerned him he was yet to learn.

Gaining his cabin, he glided noiselessly inside, closed the door to a mere crack, sat down on the edge of the bunk and awaited developments. Half an hour passed. An hour. Now and then a footfall sounded on the deck outside. Tiny waves beat a ceaseless refrain against the sides of the ship.

Seven bells struck. Through the port hole of the cabin he could see the lights of the city moving slowly across his line of vision. For an instant he thought the ship was under way. Then he realized that it was merely swinging about with the turn of the tide.

The minutes dragged by slowly. He began to regret his hasty action in returning to the ship. If anything were afoot, it was ten to one it didn't concern him personally. Possibly some smuggling matter that was vital only to the captain and Hackwood but which they naturally wished to keep secret from any prying American.

Eight bells struck—twelve o'clock. The sound had hardly died away when Atwell heard a boat grate against the side of the *Mazatlan*. Instantly he heard the ship rouse to action, the patter of feet on deck, the muffled hiss of winches. Gratified that at least his

trip had not been entirely in vain, Atwell rose, walked to the door of his stateroom and opened it cautiously. All the activity, he saw, was on the after well deck, just below his cabin.

He watched a moment, saw that preparations were being made to transfer cargo to a tug which lay alongside. An uneasiness swept over him. The dredging equipment which he had brought down from San Francisco was in that section of the hold beneath the after well deck. Was an attempt being made to steal it? Or were these men after some other part of the cargo?

He crept out of his room cautiously. The upper deck at that point was deep in shadow and as no lights were being shown on the well deck, he knew that he could watch proceedings without being observed. No time was wasted by the crew. A cargo boom swung over the hold, dropping its sling into the yawning pit below. The winch growled. A heavy box swung up out of the hold. Raised to the height of the upper deck before being swung over the side to the tug, it came so close to Atwell that he could have put out his hand and touched it.

And in the glow of the anchor light he saw the black letters on the side of the box: "South American Dredging Company, Condota, Andegoya." It was the name of the company which he and Cunningham had formed.

So that was Hackwood's game after all! Trying

to steal his dredge machinery! Well, he'd have a few words to say about the matter and there was no time like the present to say them.

Drawing his gun, he stepped forward against the rail. On the well deck below, directing the operations, he made out the squat, corpulent figure of Captain José Munoz.

"Just a minute, captain," Atwell barked. "What is the meaning of this?" And then, realizing that the captain's knowledge of English was limited, he repeated his demand in Spanish.

The light was very faint but still it was strong enough to reveal the look of pained surprise that came over the skipper's fat countenance. The men on the deck, too, turned startled faces upward. Atwell knew that he was in command of the situation and he made haste to force his advantage.

"Captain, order that box put back aboard the ship or I'll shoot you down in your tracks," he commanded, as sharply as his halting Spanish would permit.

Munoz stared at him for a long moment, his loose mouth agape. Then he spoke haltingly, plainly sparring for time.

"Señor, do you realize that I am the captain of this ship? You have no right to threaten me in this way."

"Haven't I? Well, what right have you to try to steal my cargo?"

"The cargo is not yours, señor."

"But I saw the name of my company painted on that box you put over the side."

"There is some mistake, señor," the captain muttered.

"No, there is no mistake," Atwell contradicted shortly.

Munoz slowly removed his cap and ran an unsteady hand through his hair. Then, apparently making up his mind, he gave a hasty order to his men. It was spoken so swiftly that Atwell could not catch the portent of the words. Their meaning was made plain an instant later, however, when half a dozen men jumped for the ladder leading to the upper deck.

Atwell's blood chilled. He knew that he was in the wrong. He knew that even in his own country, on a ship of American registry, his high-handed tactics in threatening the captain's life would plunge him into serious trouble. And in Andegoya, with its unfamiliar laws and its antipathy toward foreigners, such a course might lead to the gravest consequences. Taking no chances of being ultimately held to answer to a charge of murder, he pocketed his gun and faced the ladder with clenched fists, determined to put up some sort of a fight at whatever the cost.

He met the first man who appeared at the head of the ladder with a crashing blow against the jaw. The sailor toppled backward to the deck below. But Atwell, misjudging the distance in the darkness, lost his balance and came dangerously near to following

him. He caught the rail just in time, however, and swung out over space for an instant. By the time he had recovered his footing, three men had gained the upper deck. They came at him together.

Atwell singled out the largest and launched a vicious attack against him, fighting off the other two as best he could. He had the satisfaction of seeing the men crumple under a rain of blows. As he swung about to meet the others, he was conscious that more sailors had streamed up the ladder behind him. He turned quickly, knocked one of them down with a powerful uppercut. A moment later he was in the vortex of myriad swinging fists.

He fought doggedly for a time, head down, surging this way and that, striving valiantly to keep his footing against the many clutching hands which strove to drag him to the deck. Suddenly he heard the screech of a siren close aboard. Then the silver rays of a powerful searchlight cut the darkness, swung the length of the ship, came to rest on the *mêlée* of tangled forms on the after deck.

The sailors withdrew abruptly, staring wild-eyed into the silver pencil of light. Groggy as he was by this time, the meaning of the searchlight penetrated his fogged brain instantly. A revenue cutter! Government officials! Thank heaven an interruption had come before these damned greasers had put him out! He chuckled to himself. The fat skipper would have some explaining to do before he got through with him.

Atwell faced outboard, opened his mouth to hail the cutter. And in that instant the heavy butt of a revolver crashed against the back of his head. The rays of the searchlight seemed to burst in every direction, like a gigantic pyrotechnic display. Then darkness closed over him like a blanket and he slumped to the deck.

CHAPTER V

WHEN Bob Atwell awoke it was daylight. He realized this much without opening his eyes. His head pained fearfully and his whole body ached as though it were a mass of bruises. He had heard somewhere that greasers wouldn't fight! Well, he consoled himself, he had found out differently, if he had accomplished nothing else.

It was with considerable effort that he managed to force his eyes open. Both were badly swollen, one so much that only the faintest light came under the puffed lid. Lying on his back on some kind of a rough cot, he appraised his surroundings slowly. He did not recognize them. The room in which he lay was indescribably dirty and very gloomy. The only light came from a small window high in the wall directly above him. Something about the light it admitted puzzled him. Then it dawned upon him that the window was barred.

He jerked his head around, groaning at the pain the movement caused him, and stared across the small room. An iron door met his gaze and, behind it, staring at him through the bars, he made out a *soldado* in a tattered uniform. Atwell cursed softly, through swollen lips. So they had thrown him in jail, had they? Probably for stealing that cursed

skiff. Oh, well, he shouldn't have a great deal of trouble getting out of it, particularly when he was quite willing to pay the owner for the loss of his boat.

He sat up and swung his feet around to the floor. With the movement, the *soldado* shuffled off down the dismal passageway outside the cell. Atwell sat on the edge of his bed for a time, ruminating at the unfortunate turn events had taken. At any rate, he reflected philosophically, he had succeeded in keeping Munoz and Hackwood from stealing their dredger machinery. Or, if it had been stolen after he passed out of the picture, he at least knew whom to hold responsible.

Atwell's thoughts were interrupted by the arrival at his cell of a small, officious young native, foppishly attired, supercilious of manner. He was accompanied by three *soldados*, one of whom unlocked the door, admitted the officious person, and hastily turned the key again. The sub-prefect, for such he proved to be, began at once a rapid barrage of questions, addressed in English.

"Your full name, señor? Your occupation? Your birthplace? Your age? . . ."

He wrote the answers in a large book which he spread out before him on the cot. There were more questions, a dozen of them; all, to Atwell, quite irrelevant.

"Now just a minute," the young American began impatiently at last. "You're not going to write a

biography of me. Let's not beat around the bush any longer. I'm willing to pay for that boat I took, and I'll pay a good price, too. And if I'm charged with assault and battery, and disturbing the peace or any other fool thing, I've got plenty of money to pay a fine and get out of here. Now let's get down to brass tacks. I don't like the looks of this hoose-gow of yours and I want to get out. How much will it cost me?"

The sub-prefect stared at him aghast, his small black eyes blinking swiftly; then he shrugged, grinning in rather a sickly fashion.

"I am afraid, señor, this is not the time to joke."

"Joke? Who wants to joke? I want to get out of here. *Que mucho dinero?*"

"But surely the señor knows that bail cannot be arranged when one is charged with a capital offense," the sleek official pointed out.

"Capital offense your foot! I haven't killed anybody."

"The señor is not charged with murder," the sub-prefect answered calmly.

"No? All right, then. Come clean. What's the charge against me?"

"Smuggling arms and ammunition into the Republic of Andegoya," the official pronounced steadily. "And that, señor, under the laws of my country, is a capital offense."

A sledge hammer could hardly have struck a harder blow than these smooth, oily words of the

sub-prefect. Atwell recoiled visibly, mustered his wits with an effort, took a firm hold on himself.

"Now, just let me get this straight. I, Robert Atwell, have been charged with smuggling arms into this country. Is that right?"

"That is correct, señor," the official admitted coldly.

"H-m, all of which is news to me," Atwell remarked grimly. "Suppose you tell me a little bit about the case. Naturally, I am more or less interested in it. And, frankly, I haven't the least idea what you are talking about."

The sub-prefect sighed, audibly and resignedly. He spoke in bored tones.

"You were arrested last night aboard the steamship *Mazatlan*, while in the act of attempting to unload certain packing cases addressed to the South American Dredging Company. The captain of the *Mazatlan*, Señor José Munoz, an esteemed countryman of mine—"

"And a damned scoundrel!" Atwell muttered under his breath. "Go on, señor."

"Captain Munoz, returning to his ship some time after midnight, found that you had forged an order for those packing cases and had induced the crew to start unloading them onto a tug. Captain Munoz remonstrated with you and was finally forced to use violence to subdue you. It was found on investigation that the packing cases contained—"

"You need not go on," Atwell interrupted. "I got

you the first time. The packing cases contained guns and ammunition. Your esteemed countryman, José Munoz, and my countryman, James Hackwood, not so esteemed, are very, very clever. No, señor, I am not a gun-runner. But in a contest for a prize damned fool, I'd carry off first honors without a struggle."

Atwell rose suddenly, his half bitter, half jocular, mood slipping from him.

"Now, señor, I want the American consul," he declared sharply, "and I want him *pronto*. If he is not here within one hour I'll pull you to pieces the first chance I get." He grasped the little sub-prefect by the nape of the neck and the seat of his trousers and tossed him toward the door. "Get moving, señor."

When the barred door had clanged behind the frightened sub-prefect, Atwell threw himself back on his cot.

"What a cursed fool I've been," he muttered bitterly. "Might have known that business of getting me ashore wasn't for any ordinary reason. A sweet mess I've got myself into. A sweet mess! Why didn't I let well enough alone and let them land their damned arms? Probably substituted their contraband on the dock in San Francisco. And I didn't have brains enough to break open a couple of cases after they put them on the ship. H-m. Rotten situation."

He cursed suddenly and vindictively. Then, subsiding, he muttered:

"And my dear friends, José Munoz and the hospitable Mr. Hackwood are quite in the clear. They go on about their business as usual. The finger of suspicion never points to them. While me—I'm the goat. H-m. Munoz certainly thought fast last night. Didn't believe it was in the old boy. H-m. Hell of a mess."

Atwell washed some of the caked blood off his face in a tin wash basin that was brought to him, made his toilet as best he could, and breakfasted on the coarse, unpalatable rations that were passed around. His spirits revived somewhat after breakfast, although his head still ached dully and every movement brought darts of pain through his muscles.

The guards had removed the remnants of his breakfast and he had dropped onto the edge of the cot to try to reason things out, when he heard a familiar voice at the door. Atwell started, as much surprised as angered, and swung slowly about. James Hackwood, immaculate in his white duck and Panama hat, was smiling through the bars at him. Dazed into speechlessness by the man's affrontery, Atwell could only stare at him in amazed bewilderment.

"Surprised to see me, are you, Atwell?" the tall man began genially. "Well, after you've been in this country a while, you'll learn that we Americans have to stick together. I heard about your arrest as soon as I got up this morning and came right over. It's bad business, my boy." He shook his head slowly, while a look that was not without admiration

came over his countenance. "You certainly had me fooled. A quiet young fellow like you being mixed up in a gun-running game. I'd never have suspected it in the world."

In all his life Atwell had never experienced such an example of insolent assurance. For Hackwood to come to him at such a time, for Hackwood deliberately to accuse him of the crime that rested on his own shoulders—it was almost unbelievable!

A biting retort was on the tip of Atwell's tongue; but he choked it off. Hackwood, judging from his actions, had no suspicions that Atwell connected him in any way with the gun-running plot. It might be better to keep his own counsel, the younger man told himself swiftly; to voice no accusations, to continue to play the fool. Time enough to settle with Hackwood when he got out of jail.

"It is decent of you to come, Hackwood," he said, controlling his anger with an effort. "As a matter of fact, I am quite up in the air about the whole thing. The first I knew or heard of any contraband arms was when the sub-prefect told me a short time ago that I had been charged with smuggling them into the country. It is plain to me that I have been made the victim of some kind of a plot."

For a long time Hackwood stared through the bars, eyeing the young prisoner, apparently weighing the truth or falsity of the statement. His acting was perfect; there was just the proper shade of doubt in his gray eyes—Atwell longed to reach through the

bars and throttle him where he stood. At last the tall man shrugged his shoulders with a faintly ironical smile; his manner was that of one who has not yet heard all the evidence and does not care to pass an opinion.

"One way or the other," he told Atwell at last, "we're going to do all we can to get you out of this, or at least to see that you get a fair trial. I have sent word to the American Consul, Mr. Theodore Montague. He should be here any minute now and will certainly do all he can for you. If it were possible, I would arrange bail for you. But unfortunately, a person charged with the smuggling of arms cannot be admitted to bail in this country. It is a capital offense, you know."

"Yes, that is what I have been told," Atwell answered, and reflected grimly that Hackwood was mighty lucky that they were separated by the heavy bars of the cell door.

"Well, I have some business to attend to, so I'll have to run along," Hackwood remarked. "If there is anything I can do, don't hesitate to send for me. I'm mighty sorry you slipped up, boy. *Buenas dias.*"

"Thanks." Atwell dared trust his lips no further. So Hackwood was sorry he slipped up, was he? Of all the sheer, unadulterated nerve, this man Hackwood's took the prize! Sorry he slipped up, and guilty as the devil himself! Atwell fell to pacing the floor, angry a bit at himself because he hadn't come right out and accused the other. He knew, however,

that such an action would have served no good purpose. Better to keep Hackwood in ignorance of his suspicions. The man seemed inclined to do what he could to help him. And, so long as Hackwood was indirectly responsible for the position in which he found himself, why not accept his offer of assistance?

It was rather a bitter pill for Atwell to swallow, nevertheless. But he was friendless and in a strange country. Cunningham was probably up the river on the concession. His cablegram to him had without doubt been intercepted in some way, leaving his partner in ignorance of his arrival. Yes, he certainly had need of all the assistance that was offered him. The evidence against him, if properly presented by that scoundrel Munoz and his corruptible crew, could be made most damning. And Munoz, with his own liberty at stake, would lie until he was black in the face.

All in all, the situation was anything but encouraging. Atwell faced it hopefully, however, quite unacquainted as yet with the swift, relentless justice that is meted out in these South American republics.

CHAPTER VI

HALF an hour after Hackwood's departure the *soldado* outside of Atwell's cell unlocked the door, threw it wide and announced, in Spanish:

"The consular agent, sir."

Atwell rose to his feet and immediately felt an inclination to sit down again as he saw that his visitor was a young woman. The fact that the consular agent was a woman, when he had always understood that only men were eligible for the consular service, was not so extraordinary. Her beauty was. It was breath-taking, bewildering.

Under other conditions, in another country, he might not have found it so. But in this filthy cell, in the squalid city of Condota, thousands of miles from home, the appearance of such a lovely woman was so unlooked for as to be completely disconcerting. Atwell stared at her in frank amazement, hardly realizing for the moment whether her hair was dark or light, her eyes blue or brown. He knew only that she was an American and that she was very young and very beautiful.

Then his vision cleared and in the brief instant before she spoke her every feature was impressed indelibly upon his memory. Hair as golden as any

nugget he had ever reclaimed from the placer fields; large, expressive eyes, as deeply blue as a mountain lake at twilight; a piquant, friendly nose; lips that were made for smiling. More than sheer beauty, more than perfection of feature, there was character in the face of this trimly dressed young woman. There was dignity, too—odd in one who could not be much past twenty. There was reserve and firmness; there was pride.

Atwell felt suddenly and unbearably ashamed. His clothing was wrinkled and dirty, his hair was disheveled, his features were puffed and swollen, he was badly in need of a shave. Of all times and all places to meet such a girl as this! He was for the moment, and for long afterward, very, very bitter.

“Mr. Atwell?” the girl questioned him softly.

He took a deep breath that was half a sigh and nodded, leaving his head bowed.

“I am Phyllis Montague,” she went on, in a businesslike manner. “My father is the American consul in Condota. He would have come to see you but he is not well to-day. I came in his place, as the government provides him with no assistant.”

Atwell searched frantically for words. He thought of telling her it was nice of her to come, realized that such an assertion would be quite banal and held his peace.

“My father,” the young woman went on, quite at her ease, “wants to assure you that he will do everything in his power to see that you get fair trial.

Maybe if you would tell me the circumstances of your arrest—”

Atwell found his tongue at last.

“Circumstances of my arrest!” he burst out. “I think the police know more about that than I do. I was unconscious when I was brought here.”

Did she shrink from him slightly? Or was it only his imagination? Then a terrible thought struck him. To all appearances he might have been a common drunkard who had been dragged in from the street. He made haste to explain.

“You see, I came down here with a shipment of dredging machinery belonging to a company in which I am interested. Last night I came ashore. Having reason to believe that some attempt would be made to steal our machinery, I took a boat down at the dock and went back to the ship, the *Mazatlan*. I found the captain removing our machinery from the hold. I ordered him to stop and there was a fight. Half a dozen greasers pitched into me and when I woke up I found myself here, charged with smuggling arms into the country.

“Of course, I realize now that I was the unfortunate victim of a plot. A shipment of arms was substituted on the dock in San Francisco for our machinery. If I hadn’t blundered out there last night, I suppose they would have landed the arms, or gotten caught trying to land them, and would have made some sort of explanation to me about leaving our machinery behind. That, in a nutshell, is the

situation. The captain, of course, seeing that he was caught by the authorities, saw the opportunity to save himself by throwing the blame on me. So here I am, with not a chance in the world so far as I can see of proving my innocence."

Phyllis Montague regarded him for several moments, her lips pursed thoughtfully. Would she believe his story? Probably not, for he realized as he reviewed it swiftly in his mind that it had sounded none too convincing. There were several loose ends to it—his suspicion that the machinery might be stolen, for one. He was not yet ready, however, to reveal Hackwood's connection with the affair.

It was only a matter of seconds but it seemed minutes that the girl stood scanning him and weighing the story. He was able to stand the suspense no longer. Almost humbly he asked:

"You believe me, don't you, Miss Montague?"

Her lips curved upward in a suggestion of a smile.

"It doesn't make much difference whether I believe you or not, Mr. Atwell," she evaded coolly.

"It is the judge whom you must convince, not me."

Like a physical blow were those quiet words. The meaning behind them was plain. They might well have been: "No, I can't quite believe you are telling the truth." And Atwell's head bowed before her direct gaze.

But it remained so for only a moment. When it raised again there was a fighting light in the dark eyes, a firm tilt to the strong chin; the boyish lips

were set in a straight line. In that brief instant the most vital thing in his life had come to be the proving of his innocence to this calm, self-possessed young woman.

His thoughts did not go beyond that point. The future, his acquittal, his release—these were as nothing compared to the single aim that had sprung, full blown, from the unvoiced indictment of Phyllis Montague.

"I am very sorry you won't believe me," he said calmly, meeting the steady gaze of her blue eyes with one that was just as unwavering.

And now her eyes were the first to fall. A little shamefully, perhaps, she stared at the tip of her shoe, tapping softly on the dusty floor.

"I am afraid you misunderstood me," she answered. "I did not say that I didn't believe you."

"Do you? Or don't you care to commit yourself?" Atwell pressed the issue.

Her eyes raised swiftly to his.

"I am not afraid to commit myself. Although, as I told you, it makes little difference what I believe."

"I should like to know," Atwell told her humbly.

A single shake of her head was her only reply. Could she have known the stab of pain that it wrung from Atwell's heart, she might have answered otherwise. It must have been reflected on his bruised face and in his bloodshot eyes, for almost at once she made haste to explain herself.

"Things like this happen almost every day," she

said impetuously. "It is not only gun-running. It is a thousand and one crimes, committed by drifting Americans, ne'er-do-wells, the backwash of the United States. My father is ill a great deal. In many of the cases I have been forced to take his place, to give what aid I could with lawyers and interpreters and money. And always they are guilty, Mr. Atwell. Always. Often the circumstances are extenuating. Many times I have felt genuinely sorry for these poor fellows. But always they are in the wrong." She paused and her eyes met his appealingly. "And have I any reason, any real reason, to suppose that you might be the exception to the rule?"

"None at all. None at all," he answered slowly, with a regretful shake of his head. "I am very, very sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry for," she reminded him. For the first time she really smiled, and such was her smile that Atwell wanted to turn his head away to hide the pain it caused him. "Whether you are guilty or innocent, my father and I will do all we can to help you. That is what we are here for. Now tell me, have you any friends in Condota?"

"One. Hiram Cunningham, a dredger man," Atwell answered miserably. "He should have met me but my cable must have gone astray. He is probably at our concession, fourteen miles up the river."

"That's fine. We'll send for him immediately. And—and money?"

"Plenty. A letter of credit. In my bag at the hotel."

"Good. Would you like me to engage a lawyer for you?"

"If you would be so kind."

"It isn't kindness, Mr. Atwell," she reminded him gently. "It is merely our duty, my father's and mine."

Power of woman to wound!

Atwell turned away, his word of thanks sounding dull and lifeless. She left him at last, left him crushed and beaten and all but hopeless. And he was glad, though his eyes were hungry as he watched her slender form merge into the gloom of the corridor. The heavy door clanged shut.

Cheerfully Phyllis Montague had departed, innocent, all unconscious of the havoc she had wrought.

CHAPTER VII

BOB ATWELL's mood was hours in passing. But pass it did. Reason triumphed over emotion and false pride. Though the thought that Phyllis Montague had misjudged him and had refused to give him the benefit of the doubt hurt cruelly, still he could hardly find it in his heart to blame her. The explanation he had offered was unconvincing at best. His appearance was all against him; his face was bruised and swollen; his clothes looked as though the *soldados* had used him to sweep the streets. Small wonder there had been doubt in her eyes as she had listened to his story.

Then, too, just as she had said, she handled such cases as his almost every day. Always the men with whom she had come in contact had been cast upon this shore of chance by the waves of ill fortune. Looking as he did, dirty, beaten, bedraggled, how could she believe that he was anything but one of the ordinary run of ne'er-do-wells who roamed the seven seas and worried consuls in every port in the world?

No, he was forced to admit, he could hardly blame her.

Yet, deeper than these thoughts, was the problem that underlay them. Why, after all, was he so

vitality concerned that this unknown young woman should judge him rightly? Pride, was it? The in-born aversion to being humiliated before any woman? No, not exactly. It seemed deeper than that. He puzzled a long time before it came to him. In essence it was pride, he told himself. Not the fear of being humiliated; that was minor. It was his better instinct rising in protest against being adjudged guilty of wrong-doing when he was really innocent. And, so long as this was true and he felt reasonably sure of proving it in court, why should he worry further about it? His conscience was clear. What else mattered?

This conclusion, arrived at while his pulse seemed a trip hammer beating against his brain, satisfied his intellect. It was logical and sensible. But, strangely, it did not satisfy the aching void that was his heart. Why, oh, why, he asked himself again and again, had Theodore Montague chanced to be ill on that particular morning?

At noon the *soldados* brought him his lunch. He ate it like one in a daze, still weak from the battering he had received the night before, still harassed in spirit. He knew that it was not the regular prison fare and wondered vaguely whom he had to thank for it. James Hackwood? Or Phyllis Montague? Oh, well, what matter? Indeed, what did matter?

His spirits then were at the depths. But, so strong is the optimism of youth, that it needed only the sound of a voice to raise them to the heights. It

was a deep voice, a hearty, booming voice. When first it came to Atwell's ears it was rumbling straightforward American curses. There were some who might have been shocked at that voice and those expletives, but to Atwell they were sheer music. Shorty Cunningham!

He leaped from his cot, scattering his dinner dishes unheeded to the stone pavement. The cell door swung open. A short, robust man stood framed in the doorway. Despite his vigor, his healthy tan, the lack of gray in his flowing red mustaches, he was obviously well past fifty years of age. His blue eyes, however, were keen and piercing as they swept the form of the prisoner. A bit austere and resentful at first, his countenance slowly melted into a smile. He gripped Atwell's hand.

"Well, boy," he began, his deep, resonant voice seeming to come from his very shoes, "what steam roller have you been tanglin' with?"

Atwell grinned, in spite of the pain it caused his battered features.

"No steam roller, Shorty. Just eight or ten greasers."

"One at a time or all at once?"

"All at once."

"H-m, no wonder you look like you'd been playing around a buzzsaw. How many'd you kill?"

"I guess I knocked out three or four before they got me."

"Good," Shorty Cunningham grunted. "What

they got you charged with? Assault or disturbing the peace?"

"Neither. I am charged with smuggling arms and ammunition into the confounded country."

"Which? How?" Cunningham bellowed.

"It's the truth, Shorty."

"Say now, quit kiddin' me, son! Gimme the low-down on this thing. I just got down from up the river. Heard you were in jail and blew over here. Now give it to me straight."

Atwell told his story in detail, laying particular stress on his suspicions of Hackwood. At the first mention of the man's name, Cunningham swore shortly.

"You know him, do you?" Atwell asked.

"Know him! Say, I almost got him run out of the country a couple of years ago. There ain't a bigger scoundrel, nor a slicker one, south of the Canal than Jim Hackwood. Plays both ends against the middle, Jim does. Smooth as a greased eel and as crooked as a tinhorn gambler. Go ahead with your story."

Cunningham did not speak for some moments after Atwell had finished. He stood in the center of the floor, a solid, substantial figure, feet wide apart, his hands thrust into the pockets of his soiled white suit, his battered hat perched precariously on the back of his shock of red hair. He spoke musingly at last, as much to himself as to Atwell.

"H-m. Bad situation. Looks like they got the

goods on you, with every one of 'em ready to lie their heads off to clear themselves. Hackwood, of course, is out of it. There's no evidence to mix him up with the affair. Though there's no doubt but that he is at the head of the whole plot. Him and Juarteiz."

"You think the *entendente* is mixed up in it, too?" Atwell questioned.

"Sure. The two of 'em are thick as thieves. They been trying to engineer a revolution here for a long time. Want to put Juarteiz in as president. Their biggest difficulty has been getting arms into the country. Government authorities have been watching 'em too carefully. Of course, they substituted their blamed arms for our machinery on the dock in San Francisco. They figured to get the stuff into the country and make explanations to us afterward. And of course that cable you sent me was intercepted."

Atwell eyed his partner thoughtfully. His words were far from reassuring and yet the mere sight of his solid, substantial bulk seemed to instill him with new courage. With a man like this to fight for him, surely the outlook couldn't be so dark. And Cunningham was a fighter; there could be no doubt of that.

"What do you think we'd better do?" Atwell asked. "Miss Montague was here this morning. Her father was ill and she came in his place. She said she'd do all she could for me." He paused,

gazing at the filth-incrusted stone flagging. "Frankly, I'm afraid it won't be much, however. She doesn't really believe I'm innocent of this fool charge."

"Doesn't she?" Cunningham remarked drily. "Well, we'll damn' well open her eyes for her. I'm going now. Keep a stiff upper lip and don't worry. Be back when I have news."

Cunningham did not return to the jail until after eight o'clock that evening. He found a restless, hollow-eyed young man pacing his cell.

"Well, they're going to try to railroad you," Cunningham began abruptly, pulling angrily at his red mustache. "Damned cold-blooded scoundrels. I thought maybe that so long as they were in the clear themselves, they might be decent enough to let you off. But there's not a hope. These greasy niggers ain't that kind. S'pose they figure you may know too much. Want to get you out of the way."

"You've seen Juarte? And Hackwood?" Atwell asked dully.

"Both of 'em. Course, I couldn't come out and accuse 'em openly. Just sounded 'em out. They won't lift a finger. Hackwood swears he has no power—legally he hasn't. Juarte swears he has got to make an example of you in an effort to stop this gun-running. Damned hypocrites! Two-faced scoundrels! I could o' throttled 'em both. Don't know but what I'll do it yet."

Atwell's mind was in a daze, numbed by worry and fatigue. The fact that he faced death meant little.

The failure of his enterprise, the working of their concession, seemed at that moment to be of greater importance than any personal peril. What an end to his dreams! What a dismal failure he had made of his first great venture! Why, he and Shorty hadn't even had a chance to start work! In line with these thoughts he asked Cunningham if he had learned what had become of their dredger parts.

"They're still on the dock in San Francisco. Found a cable at the office. From the company, wanting to know why we hadn't taken care of the stuff. I cabled them to send it on the next steamer. It'll leave Wednesday on the *John T. Scott*."

"That's the ship our crew is coming down on," Atwell murmured unsteadily.

"Crew be darned!" Cunningham exploded. "A lot o' good a crew will do you after these niggers line you up and pump a few bullets into your heart. I ain't no calamity howler, Bob. I don't want to discourage you. But I know these South American republics. And I know Hackwood and Juarte. I think I can get you off but I got to work fast. I'm leaving in the morning for the capital. It's useless to waste time here or to try to clear you at the trial. Our only chance is to work on the president. Old Juan Quilla knows his onions and he knows me. Not only that, but he has suspicions of Hackwood and Juarte. I'll come away with a pardon or I'll know the reason why."

"A pardon!"

"Sure! Why not?"

"But—but—I want to be cleared of this fool charge," Atwell burst out tempestuously. "A pardon would mean a practical admission of guilt. I want to be declared innocent. I want to be able to face people without—"

"Rot, son! Rot! What do you care what these niggers down here think? They don't mean anything to you. And your friends back in the States will never hear of this mess. Besides, if they did, they'd know blamed well you weren't mixed up in any gun-running plot. Nonsense! A pardon is our only hope. The only trouble is that it'll take me two days to get to the capital and two days to get back. That's four days. And in the meantime there's no telling what will happen here."

"You can't telegraph?" Atwell asked dully.

"Telegraph, huh! Where do you think you are? You're in Andegoya now, son. And Andegoya is the last stop this side of hell. The only communication between this town and the capital is by a day's ride on a narrow gauge railroad and another day's ride on mule-back."

Cunningham left shortly afterward, vigorous, determined, his spirit undaunted. He left a number of instructions about what to do in case Atwell were brought to trial before his return. His partner had listened to them with a heavy heart.

A pardon! Virtual admission of guilt! And he had sworn to Phyllis Montague that he was innocent.

CHAPTER VIII

FOR two days Bob Atwell sweltered in his cell in the Condota *carcel*. They were long days, hot days, hopeless days. He saw no one save his guards. He heard from no one. He seemed to have been deserted and left to his fate, whatever it might be. He knew that Shorty Cunningham was speeding to the capital in a valiant effort to gain him a pardon. But the others, Hackwood, Phyllis Montague, had to all intents and purposes forgotten him.

As the hours passed a great weight of hopelessness descended upon him—hopelessness and resignation. Never in his life had he felt so utterly alone, so utterly friendless, so completely helpless in the face of treachery and intrigue. A hundred times he told himself that he had been a fool to come to South America. He saw himself a stranger in a strange land, a land he did not understand, a land whose ways were not his ways. To be sure, honesty and justice and righteousness were the same the world over. But these things, he sensed now, were not only unknown in Andegoya but they were unwanted. It was essentially a land of intrigue and double-dealing, where a man who played the game fairly and according to his lights was hopelessly in the minority.

The feeling of hopelessness passed after a time

and left only bitterness. He hungered for the sight of a white face, for some one who could speak his own tongue. Even Hackwood would have been welcome, despite the fact that he knew the mahogany operator to be directly or indirectly responsible for the plight in which he found himself. And Phyllis Montague! Well, Atwell told himself with a bitter smile, she might at least drop in and give him a word of cheer.

On the morning of the third day, however—with two days yet to pass before Cunningham could be expected back from the capital—Atwell had visitors. Shortly after eight o'clock Miss Montague arrived at his cell. She was accompanied by a short, dark young man, with a weak chin, an important air and a brief case. Atwell realized at once who the young man was and reflected grimly that if this was a sample of Condota lawvvers he'd rather plead his case himself.

Phyllis Montague's greeting, while friendly enough, was far from warm. "This is Señor Cruzon," she explained, when the guard had swung the cell door shut. "He has consented to act as your counsel. You are to be tried this morning."

"So soon?" Atwell queried dazedly, as he shook hands with the attorney.

"We shall ask for postponement," Señor Cruzon told him officiously. "There ees not much hope that eet will be granted. But eet will do no harm to ask."

"Yes, of course," Atwell said blankly, his eyes on

Phyllis. How cool she looked, how calm and unruffled—when his own heart was pounding furiously. He wondered vaguely what made it pound so. Was it the proximity of danger? Or was it the proximity of Phyllis Montague?

"We shall go over the case now," Señor Cruzon declared, assuming his most important mien. "Tell me all that you know, Señor Atwell. We shall prepare defense."

For an hour or more they went over the various details of the case; and the more they considered it, the more hopeless it seemed to become. They viewed it from every angle. They sought vainly for loopholes in the evidence. But, knowing well how Captain Munoz and his crew would testify, they were compelled at last to admit that their only hope was a postponement that would allow Cunningham time to get back from the capital with a pardon.

Phyllis Montague did not depart with Señor Cruzon. Neither did she speak immediately they were alone. For the first time since Atwell had met her, she seemed to lack a measure of her self-possession. Seated in a make-shift chair at one side of the cell, she did not meet his eyes at once. Instead she watched the toe of her shoe as it traced tiny circles on the flagstones.

"What did you think of him?" she asked at last, a touch of humility in her voice.

"Who? Cruzon?"

"Yes."

"Well," Atwell laughed softly, "in the States I think we'd call such a lawyer a shyster. However, I may be wrong. He may be a very good attorney!"

"No, he's not," Phyllis spoke up swiftly. "And I am terribly sorry, Mr. Atwell. I did my best. I worked for two days trying to interest different lawyers in your case. But they were all afraid. They know the stand Juarteiz has taken and they do not dare oppose him."

Atwell shook his head, smiling bitterly. "It is hard for me to comprehend such a man. Such a hypocrite!"

"Hypocrite!" She looked up at him now, mildly questioning.

"Juarteiz is behind the whole plot," Atwell stated coldly.

"Why do you think so, Mr. Atwell?"

"Solely because Shorty Cunningham says so. He has been in this country a long time. He knows these people, knows their ways. He says that Juarteiz is planning to overthrow President Quilla. And, somehow, I think Shorty knows what he is talking about."

The girl made no reply to this assertion. She sat very still, staring straight at Atwell without seeing him. At last she shook her head with a certain finality.

"I am sure I don't know. Many strange things go on down here that I do not understand. I have only been here two years, you know. I have heard

that in the past there have been plots against the government, many of them. But as to the present, I am quite in ignorance."

She rose then, turned toward the door, called to the guard to open it. She was about to pass out when she paused. Turning back to Atwell, she said very earnestly:

"I hope you will believe me when I tell you that I did my best to get you a good lawyer."

Atwell smiled into her blue eyes and felt his heart pounding again. "I know you have done all you can," he said, "and I am very grateful."

"I will be with you at the trial," she said, as she passed through the door. "It is set for eleven."

The door clanged shut behind her, leaving Atwell staring through the bars at the grimy stone of the opposite wall. A moment later he heard voices down the passageway—Phyllis' voice, the voice of another woman. Then he heard Phyllis' receding footsteps. An instant later the guard appeared and again opened the cell door. Atwell, with an involuntary gasp of astonishment, took an unsteady step backward.

Dolores de Rico, dressed all in white and looking more adorable than he believed a woman could look, stood framed in the doorway. She was smiling at him, a bit rueful, but certainly very friendly. She advanced slowly, with a sinuous grace that was quite incongruous to the grimy cell.

"Mr. Atwell! I'm sorry!" The words were simple, yet they conveyed a world of sincerity.

Atwell took her outstretched hand and pressed it warmly. For the moment he was completely mastered by surprise. He sought for words and found none. Nevertheless, he felt that here was a true friend. There was no time for an analysis of that feeling; he did not know why she impressed him in that way. Indeed, he did not care. He knew instinctively that Señorita de Rico was his friend. That was enough.

"I just heard this morning that you had been arrested," she went on. "I came at once, knowing that you must have few friends here."

"You are very kind, señorita," Atwell answered, making no attempt to conceal the gratitude in his voice.

"It is nothing," she returned, with a deprecatory shrug of her slender shoulders. "You are in trouble—I want to help you. May I?"

"I am afraid there is very little that can be done. I am to be tried at eleven this morning. I won't try to tell you that I am the victim of a plot. It sounds—well, rather trite. Besides, what's the difference? They seem to have the evidence against me and it looks as though I'd be convicted."

Señorita de Rico's eyes narrowed. Atwell watched her with a sudden feeling of approval. Here was a woman who knew how to fight and who was willing to fight. Here was a woman, he sensed, who gloried in a struggle—if only for the life of a casual American with whom she was hardly acquainted.

"You have an attorney?" she asked swiftly.

"Yes. A Señor Cruzon. Miss Montague got him to take the case."

"Cruzon!" she snapped, with a toss of her dark head. "Better to have an infant in arms. A child, at least, could do you no harm. You must have another attorney."

"But Miss Montague tried to get a better man. She said they were all afraid to take the case."

"I shall get you an attorney," the young woman asserted. "I shall get you the best in Condota. You say your trial is set for eleven this morning?"

"Yes. That is what I understand."

"Then there is no time to be lost. I must hurry. I shall send you Señor Jesus de Golia. Tell him everything. He is to be trusted. He will do all he can for you. Only one request I must make. Please do not tell any one that I have been here to-day. I do not wish it known that I have interested myself in your behalf." Then, apparently seeing the question in his eyes, she added: "You would not understand, Mr. Atwell."

She pressed his hand swiftly, smiled into his eyes. "I want to be your friend," she said earnestly. "You accept me, don't you?"

"Yes. I do," Atwell answered dazedly.

"Without question?" she persisted, still pressing his hand with a firm clasp.

"Without question," Atwell affirmed.

"That is best," Señorita de Rico laughed. "Ques-

tions are often embarrassing, particularly when one has little time. Good-bye. I won't see you again until—afterward. And good luck."

Bob Atwell was in a state of complete bewilderment as he dropped onto the edge of his cot. His first feeling on seeing Señorita de Rico had been one of gratitude. He had been pleased that she remembered him, thankful that she had been interested enough to come and see him.

Now, however, came questions. Why was she so interested in him? Why was she going out of her way to aid him, an almost total stranger? And, above all, why had she insisted upon the utmost secrecy?

He liked her, admired her, although deep in his heart he sensed vaguely that he should not. Without giving expression to the thought, he knew that there was something behind her sudden and extraordinary interest in him, some deeply underlying motive that was in accord with the air of mystery and intrigue that pervaded the city of Condota. She was a woman of the world, with wealth, charm, many admirers. What could there possibly be about him that would bring her to the *carcel* and send her forth with the determination to save his life?

He was hardly conceited enough to think that she had fallen in love with him. What other reason could she have? Ordinary philanthropy? Hardly. She wasn't the type.

Atwell gave it up. He swore softly and shook his head.

THE COAST OF INTRIGUE

"I'd get brain fever trying to figure it out," he murmured. "There is something afoot. That's as plain as the nose on your face. But apparently I'm not supposed to know what it is. And until she wants me to know, I'll have to remain in ignorance, I guess. Hell!"

CHAPTER IX

SEÑOR JESUS DE GOLIA, who reached Atwell's cell within half an hour after Señorita de Rico had departed, proved to be an estimable gentleman. Despite the fact that he seemed flustered and excited, as any lawyer undoubtedly would on being called into a case on such short notice, he inspired Atwell with confidence. They only had time enough to go over the case briefly, but the young American saw at once that de Golia knew his business, which is more than he suspected of Señor Cruzon.

The latter gentleman arrived with the guards which were to escort Atwell to the court. He stood in the doorway a moment, took in the situation at a glance and demanded curtly: "You have engaged other counsel, señor?"

"Yes, I have," Atwell answered, not without a certain cordiality. "Maybe it might be well if you two gentlemen got together—"

"Thank you, no, señor!" Cruzon shook his head hastily. He rubbed his hands together, as though washing them. "I withdraw."

Suiting the action to the words, he beat a hasty retreat down the corridor.

"It is better so," de Golia commented. "He would have done more harm than good. He is not liked."

Thereafter events moved with a swift precision that stamped them as distinctly different from court procedure in the United States. Atwell was escorted to the courtroom and allowed to take a chair beside Phyllis Montague, whom he found awaiting him. The young woman scanned de Golia an instant and then cast a questioning look at Atwell. Although she made no comment, he sensed that she was hurt.

"I am sorry," he said to her, in a contrite whisper. "Señor de Golia offered to defend me and I thought it best to accept."

"There is nothing to be sorry about," she assured him. "I am glad you got a better man."

"I know it seems ungrateful, after all you did for me," Atwell said miserably. "But, somehow, I didn't have much confidence in Cruzon."

"Neither did I," Miss Montague returned. "But he was the best that I could get." She added, in a lower tone: "I spoke to Señor de Golia yesterday. He refused to have anything to do with the case."

That was all. The arraignment began a moment later. But Atwell found himself wondering how Señorita de Rico had succeeded, and in such a short time, where Phyllis had failed.

Jesus de Golia was an able lawyer. He had decided that a postponement was the easiest solution of the difficulty and he spoke long and eloquently of the need for a delay. He might as well have talked to an empty chair. Before the attorney had spoken a dozen words, Atwell knew that the judge was

prejudiced against him. The whole atmosphere of the court-room, with its pompous officials and its scattering of nondescript spectators was hostile.

He might as well cry for the moon as to ask for a fair trial. It was all part of the plot to railroad him and get him out of the way, he told himself, never realizing that this particular judge and the officials of his court were loyal to President Juan Quilla and regarded a foreign gun-runner with far more animosity than they would regard a first class murderer. Because Atwell was a foreigner and had virtually been caught with the goods, they considered it their duty to their president and their country to get him out of the way as expeditiously and as permanently as possible.

De Golia made his motion for postponement and heard it denied. The trial proceeded. A jury presented little difficulty. Twelve men were dragged in off the street and ushered into the box. De Golia challenged a few of them, saw them replaced by others no more competent, and let it go at that.

The taking of evidence was short. Captain Munoz, looking fatter and greasier than ever, testified that the arms, labeled as dredge machinery, had been placed aboard his ship in San Francisco by Atwell; he testified that Atwell had ordered their removal in the harbor of Condota. Asked by de Golia if it were not unusual to unload cargo at night, the captain asserted that Atwell had implied that he was in a hurry to get the machinery up the river.

Another captain, apparently a member of the Coast Guard, testified that he had become suspicious of the movements on the *Mazatlan*, had boarded her, seized the arms and arrested Atwell after a terrific struggle. Several other sailors testified briefly, and the prosecution closed its case.

There were arguments, very pointed by the prosecution, very futile by the defense. The court gave its instructions to the jury and the twelve good men and true filed out.

"The verdict will be guilty," de Golia whispered behind his hand. His face was flushed; perspiration dripped from his forehead; his white suit clung to him as though he had been drenched in a rainstorm. "We shall have to demand a stay of execution."

Atwell nodded wearily and stole a glance at Phyllis. The girl was sitting very straight and still in her chair. She had hardly moved throughout the trial. Atwell felt sorry for her in a way. What must be her faith in mankind, in her fellow Americans, when she saw things like this going on almost every day? The evidence against him had been complete and damning. Even if she had withheld judgment up to this time, she must now be convinced of his guilt. Indeed, so strong had been the prosecution's case that he felt almost as if he had lied to her in declaring his innocence.

He knew, too, that any further declaration of that sort would only make matters worse. And yet he did want to say something to her. He was weak

enough to want to hear her voice, if it were only raised in condemnation of him.

"I want to thank you for all you've done for me, Miss Montague," he said at last, and hated himself for the banality of the remark.

She turned and met his gaze, smiling very faintly. "I did nothing. Some one else did more in a few moments than I did in two days."

Atwell looked at her searchingly, caught a faint reflection of bitterness in her eyes. Did she know that Dolores de Rico had visited him in his cell that morning? Of course! They had met in the corridor. Phyllis had needed only to glance over her shoulder to have seen the other woman enter his cell.

Atwell lowered his voice. "Do you know who induced Señor de Golia to act as my counsel?"

"I don't believe it makes a great deal of difference, does it?" she parried. Did he only imagine it, or did her voice sound dull and lifeless, discouraged. "As things will probably turn out, Señor Cruzon would have done just as well. Not that I blame you for accepting Señor de Golia's aid. He is a much better attorney. You were quite justified."

Atwell shrugged wearily. After all, what difference did anything make? Unless de Golia was able to gain a stay of execution, it would be the end of him. And, somehow, he had gone through so much the last few days that he didn't care greatly what happened. His brain had been worn out by ceaseless grappling with problems that were quite

beyond him. The struggle on the ship and the sleepless nights that had followed had left his body fagged and weary. His mind was dazed with uncertainty. His spirit had sunk to the depths.

Within five minutes after it had filed out, the jury straggled back with a verdict: guilty. Atwell received it without emotion. He had known from the first what it would be. De Golia, however, was on his feet at once, demanding a new trial, demanding time to appeal, demanding so many things that Atwell, with his limited knowledge of Spanish, could not follow him. The court denied each request speedily and unequivocally.

When de Golia at last ran out of breath and was forced to pause, the judge ordered Atwell to his feet. The young man rose and with the movement came anger and a swift contempt for this court and all that it represented. Far from showing humility, there was a sneer on his lips as he heard the judge order him to be shot at six o'clock the following morning.

He would have liked to have told the court then and there what he thought of it. He refrained only because he could not do it justice with his scanty command of the language.

De Golia was talking again, demanding a postponement of sentence. The judge was steadfastly shaking his head. Atwell grasped his attorney's arm.

"Enough of that," he rasped. "You're wasting your breath. Better call it a day and be thankful they're not going to shoot you too."

CHAPTER X

BOB ATWELL had never been sentenced to death before and he had no idea how a condemned man should feel. Still, he told himself as he was escorted across the *patio* to the *carcel*, he certainly was experiencing none of the emotions that should be experienced by a man who was to die on the morrow. Probably, he reflected, it was because it had all come so suddenly that his dazed brain had not had time to recover from the shock.

There was a grim smile on his lips as he glanced across the *patio* and picked out in his imagination the very wall against which he would be placed. There were a number of chips in it, breast high. More than one poor beggar had evidently died there. He knew that he should view it with horror. He knew that at that moment his body should be trembling with fear. And yet, strangely, he underwent none of these emotions. The morrow seemed far away. Death seemed very remote.

Nevertheless, once he was locked in his cell again, his depression of the morning returned. There was something forcefully real about that squalid cell with its barred door, something that jerked him up face to face with the issue. He thought it over calmly; unless a miracle occurred—an aeroplane to bring

Shorty Cunningham back from the capital; a change of heart on the part of the judge or Juartez—he would most certainly be shot on the following morning.

Miracles had happened; at least, he had read of them. To be sure, he had never witnessed one. But then he had lived in the States all his life. Who could tell what would happen down here in this topsy-turvy republic?

He had been back in the *carcel* only a few minutes when Phyllis Montague was admitted to his cell. Not until he saw her did he realize that he had not spoken to her after the jury brought in its verdict. She looked very white and shaken as she came in. Could it be possible that her distraction had been caused by his plight? If it had, Atwell reflected, she was far more perturbed than he.

"I don't want you to give up hope—just because they have sentenced you," the girl said unsteadily.

Atwell smiled, feeling oddly at ease. "Don't worry, Miss Montague. I shan't give up hope until, as they say in stories, the last shot is fired."

"We are going to do all we can for you," Miss Montague went on soberly, failing to fall in with his mood. "I shall have my father cable the State Department at once. They may be willing to intervene."

"It would be nice of them," Atwell smiled.

"They don't interfere in these matters ordinarily. The department usually plays a hands-off policy.

So—" she looked up at him hopelessly— "don't count on it—too much."

"I won't," he assured her. "Still, it's mighty fine of you to go to all this trouble."

"Trouble?" she questioned dazedly. "When your life is at stake?"

"But after all," he remarked easily, "I may be guilty, you know."

"Yes, but even if you are, you don't deserve to be—killed!" She stumbled over the last word, spoke it with difficulty.

"But I haven't been killed yet," Atwell reminded her.

"Yes, but they'll do it—unless we can rouse the State Department and stop them."

Atwell did not speak for several moments. He stood watching her, wondering if she were still convinced of his guilt. Yes, he decided, she must be. He had given her the opportunity to tell him she believed him innocent—she had not taken advantage of it. He turned away at last, his care-free mood slipping from him like a cloak. Fear did not come in its stead, nor hopelessness—only bitterness and a dull ache in his heart.

Phyllis was beside him in an instant; her hand touched his shoulder.

"Don't give up hope! Please!" she begged.

"I haven't!" he answered almost roughly, not daring to turn and meet her eyes. He knew that he lied. He knew that in the last moment he had given up

hope. And he told himself steadfastly that he did not care what happened on the morrow—so greatly had the love of life been undermined by emotion and tribulation.

He turned to her at last. Almost gruffly he said: "You were saying something about a cable."

The girl took a quick step backward and the color surged into her white cheeks. She nodded unsteadily, a puzzled look in her deep blue eyes.

"Yes. I'll go at once. I'll come back as soon as there is news. The cable office closes at midnight. If we haven't heard by then I'll—come back anyway. I'll stay with you—until morning."

Atwell grasped her hand in a sudden rush of emotion. He pressed it fervently, tried to speak and could not. For a long moment they stood there, breathing heavily, the girl's eyes moist with tears. Then Atwell summoned his will, forced a smile.

"I'll be waiting for you," he remarked, half facetiously. "Good-bye. And good luck."

Phyllis made no reply as she motioned the guard outside to open the door. The tears were streaming unheeded down her cheeks as she hurried out of the cell.

For a long time Atwell did not move; he stood stock-still, his hand outstretched as she had released it. Then he turned wearily to his cot, stretched himself out at full length and began the dreary ordeal of waiting. His mind was still dazed and, by sheer effort of will, he forced it to remain in that condition.

He knew that no amount of thinking could possibly do him any good—dwelling on his predicament would only make it more unbearable.

So he steadfastly kept his mind a blank and waited for news from Phyllis Montague. The afternoon dragged by. Dusk came and with it a howling wind that whined around the corners of the *carcel*, adding its weird voice to the myriad night noises that penetrated Atwell's cell. Dinner was brought in and laid on the floor beside him. The young man did not heed it.

By eight o'clock a torrential rain was splashing in the courtyard outside the jail. Atwell was only vaguely conscious of it. With the passing of the hours, hope was dying swiftly. The cable office closed at twelve, Phyllis had said. If no word was received from the State Department by then. . . .

Resolutely Atwell refused to allow his thoughts to go farther. But his ears were strained now, anxious for the sound of familiar footsteps in the corridor. If Phyllis came before twelve, it would mean that she had heard from the State Department. The news she brought might be good, it might be bad. But it would at least break the monotony of waiting.

Nine o'clock came. Ten o'clock. Outside the storm was increasing in violence, assuming almost the proportions of a hurricane. The pattering of the great raindrops sounded like the rush of a torrent. An occasional peal of thunder echoed down from

the mountains behind the city, adding to the tumult of roaring wind and beating rain.

Under the bombardment of noise, Atwell became restive. Every footfall in the corridor brought him up to his elbow, his nerves on edge, his eyes peering through the dim light shed by his single candle.

Eleven o'clock came. Still there was no word from Phyllis. Then a light footfall sounded in the passageway. He heard a low conversation, barely audible above the noise of the storm. Atwell leaped eagerly to his feet. He ran to the door, peering anxiously through the bars. He saw only a small native, a civilian, talking earnestly to two of the *soldados*.

Atwell swung around, disappointed, baffled. He was about to drop onto his cot again, when he heard a key grind in the door of the cell. He turned eagerly, only to have his hopes blasted when he saw only the two guards and the native. The door swung open. The native stepped inside, nodded to Atwell and spoke a single word: "Come."

The young man regarded him dazedly. Then his visitor touched a finger to his lips, jerked his head toward the door and started out of the cell. Atwell followed, wonderingly. They passed through the corridor unmolested and came to a door at the far end. Atwell's escort opened this cautiously, peered out into the darkness and then nodded to him to follow. He emerged into a storm-swept alley at the rear of the *carcel*.

Bob Atwell's first inclination, on finding himself actually free, was to put as much space as possible between himself and the jail. Freedom, even the freedom of that dark alley and the driving rain and the howling wind, seemed like the end of a terrible nightmare. He was awake at last—distance and time would annihilate the memory of those dark hours he had spent under the shadow of Andegoyan justice.

His escort, however, seemed to know where he was going. He took Atwell's arm and started down the alley. The latter realized that there was nothing to do but follow him. He had no idea in what part of town the jail was located and in the darkness and storm he might walk for hours before finding his hotel. He rather suspected that the native intended to lead him to the American consulate.

It seemed certain now that the cable to the State Department had borne results. Phyllis had evidently been able to force the authorities to free him and, not wanting to venture out into the storm, had sent a servant to the *carcel* with his release. Atwell's heart warmed as he thought of the brave fight the girl had waged for his life; he was very grateful. He was light-hearted, too, though he was wet to the skin before he had gone a hundred feet.

"Where are you taking me?" he asked his guide.

The native shook his head and made no answer. Then, suspecting that the man did not speak English,

Atwell repeated the question in Spanish. Again there was no answer, the native only shaking his head and urging him forward.

"All right. Suit yourself," Atwell smiled to himself. "So long as I'm out of that pig pen of a jail, I don't much care where you take me."

Together they had plunged into the darkened, storm-swept city, beating their way against the wind and driving rain, hurrying through back alleys and around gusty corners. Atwell first became suspicious when he realized that his guide was keeping to the alleys and avoiding the thoroughfare. This puzzled him a bit. He had been released—what was the danger of coming out into the open? And yet he knew by the course they were taking that the native was deliberately keeping away from the more important streets.

His suspicions were confirmed when the guide suddenly grasped his arm and jerked him into a doorway.

"Say, what's the idea?" he began, and broke off when the native frantically signaled silence. Then he saw two men hurry by, their heads bowed against the rain, and realized why his guide had pulled him into the doorway. Atwell waited until the men were well out of earshot. Then he demanded, speaking in Spanish:

"Where are you taking me and why do we have to be so mysterious? If I have been released, I have been released. That is an end to the matter. I am

not ashamed to show my face in public. Come, my friend, tell me where we are going and why?"

In the faint light Atwell could see the man blinking up at him. His black eyes were shining, his dark face was dotted with drops of rain. Very quietly he made answer:

"The señor would do well not to look a gift horse in the mouth."

Atwell gasped, ran an unsteady hand through his rain-matted hair. Then he nodded docilely, without speaking, and followed close at his guide's heels when the latter led the way out of the doorway. After all, he reflected, he was free. He had in some way escaped the firing squad. This was not the time nor the place to question the means by which his freedom had been gained.

For half an hour or more Atwell followed his guide through the darkness. Then, on the outskirts of the city, they reached a large and imposing residence. The American could see its lights blinking vaguely through the trees and shrubbery that surrounded it. He nodded to himself as his guide turned into the driveway. The consulate, without a doubt. And, judging from his escort's manner, Phyllis Montague must have been compelled to use questionable means in getting him out of jail.

The native followed a walk around one side of the house, opened a door and bade him enter. Atwell found himself in a small hallway. He also found

a liveried servant, who was apparently waiting there for his arrival.

"Come, please," the servant ordered, speaking in English.

Atwell followed readily enough. The interior of the house was warm and cheerful after half an hour in the storm. The servant led the way up a flight of stairs and, opening a door, motioned Atwell to enter. The young man found himself in a well appointed bedroom. Through a doorway he caught a glimpse of a tiled bath. And, most extraordinary, he saw a familiar hand bag beside the dresser and familiar clothes laid out on the bed. He grinned suddenly, happily. Could any one be more thoughtful? Phyllis Montague was an angel, nothing less!

"The señor will want to bathe and change his clothes," the servant said. "He will find everything. If anything is lacking, he needs only to ring. And the señorita will see him as soon as he makes his toilet."

Atwell swung slowly about, stared at the Andegoyan for a moment. There had been something odd in the way the man had spoken, something that set vague thoughts to coursing through his brain.

"You say the señorita will see me?" Atwell questioned coolly.

The servant nodded, his black eyes twinkling.

"And who," Atwell queried further, "might the señorita be?"

A soft footfall sounded in the hallway. The ser-

vant, instead of answering, turned around swiftly. Framed in the doorway, the most gracious of smiles on her ruby lips, stood Dolores de Rico.

"The señorita might be Miss Montague," she said softly, her eyes laughing, "but she isn't. The señorita is only I."

CHAPTER XI

DOLORES DE RICO was dressed in a clinging black gown that accentuated the lines of her supple figure. It contrasted with the unusual whiteness of her skin; it matched the mass of shining hair which was combed straight back from her high forehead and coiled low on her neck. Watching her, Bob Atwell was forced to a realization that he had rarely seen as charming a woman as Señorita de Rico. Phyllis Montague was beautiful, of course, but hers was the dainty, fragile beauty of the orchid. Dolores' beauty was that of a full-blown rose, scintillating, exotic.

To say that Bob Atwell was surprised when he saw her standing in the doorway would be an exaggeration. Since his cell door had opened that night and the native had led him out into the darkness, he had suspected that things were not exactly as they should be. However, he didn't care greatly how his release had been gained. He was free; that was the main thing—and, as his guide had said, he would do well not to look a gift horse in the mouth.

"I am very glad you are safe, señor," Dolores went on. "I will await you downstairs. Dinner will be served in half an hour."

"Dinner!" Atwell exclaimed. "Why, it must be nearly midnight!"

"I have waited for you," the young woman answered smilingly, and departed, followed by the servant.

Atwell bathed and dressed feverishly. The lassitude that had gripped his body and spirit during the last few days seemed to slip away as he donned fresh clothing. He was anxious, even eager for the coming meeting with Señorita de Rico. Two questions, he found, were running through his mind. How had the young woman obtained his release? And, even more to the point, what had prompted the action?

Dinner was served in a small, dimly lighted dining room. For the first time since his arrest Atwell ate freely and thoroughly enjoyed his meal. The young woman toyed with her food, however, giving her guest the idea that she was only eating with him as a courtesy. The talk was of commonplaces. No mention was made of Atwell's imprisonment and subsequent escape until coffee was served. Then the señorita broached the subject that was uppermost in his mind.

"I suppose you are wondering how I got you out of the jail," Dolores smiled, regarding him across the table with her languorous dark eyes.

"I'll have to admit that I am," Atwell returned.

"Had you any suspicions?"

"Suspicious?" the young man repeated, mildly questioning.

"That everything wasn't open and above board?"

Atwell shrugged easily. "I was hardly in a position to question the method of my release. Still, now that I am apparently free, I don't mind admitting that I was a bit suspicious."

The woman smiled, plainly a bit proud. "It was really very simple, although hardly within the law. I once did the keeper of the prison a very great favor. To-night I asked him to return it."

Atwell gazed at her a bit bewilderedly. "Do you mean to say that a jail keeper has the authority to release a condemned prisoner?" he asked.

"I forged an order for your release," the young woman told him, as calmly as though she had been talking about the weather. "Of course, the keeper knew it was a forgery. But I had told him beforehand what I was going to do. He objected at first, but I reminded him of the favor I had done him and forced him to go through with it. To-morrow there will be an investigation. But the keeper will be, as you Americans say, in the clear. For he will claim that he did not recognize the forgery. And by to-morrow night Señor Cunningham will be back from the capital with a pardon."

Atwell sat back in his chair and stared at her, dumbfounded. The extent of the intrigue with which this republic seethed was quite beyond his comprehension. She returned his gaze steadily, smiling a bit, obviously not a little proud of her coup.

"You see," she went on after a moment, her face suddenly serious, "I happen to know that you are

innocent of any crime. Had I not known that, I might not have been so ready to help you."

"But even that does not explain—" Atwell broke off.

Curious as he was, he knew that it would be the height of discourtesy to demand a reason for the señorita's action in saving his life. It was not merely philanthropy, the desire to keep an innocent man from paying with his life for a crime he did not commit—no, he knew better than that. Señorita de Rico was not a philanthropist. She was an adventuress. Of this he was certain. Yet he was none the less grateful to her for what she had done and he made haste to express his gratitude.

But the señorita waved him aside with a gesture of her slender white hand. "It is nothing, señor," she deprecated. "I am glad I was able to help you."

"On the contrary," Atwell smiled. "It was a great deal—to me. And I hope that I may some day be able to repay you."

A quick look from her flashing eyes, a look that seemed to say: "Young man, just how much do you know?" Her words, however, were reassuring: "Forget it, señor. You owe me nothing. My reward has been in saving your life."

Words, Atwell told himself. Naturally, he could not forget what she had done for him. Neither, he reflected grimly, would Señorita de Rico forget, despite her protestations. In a way, his position irked him. Beautiful as this young woman was, charming

and friendly as was her manner, Atwell was not drawn to her any too strongly. He suspected that she was of the type who play both ends against the middle, who do nothing without careful calculation and without definite reasons behind their actions. He liked her; indeed, he had not cause for disliking her—and yet he hated to be under obligation to her.

Nevertheless, he owed her a great debt and he vowed that when the time came, as come it must, he would do his best to pay it.

"There is only one thing I must ask of you," Dolores remarked, sipping her coffee slowly.

"You need only to ask it." Atwell leaned forward, unable to hide his eagerness. An explanation at last!

"You must tell no one that I forged the order for your release."

Atwell relaxed in his chair, disappointed. "I give you my word, señorita. I shall tell no one. Not even my partner."

She smiled her thanks, her elbow resting on the table, her cup poised before her lips. Atwell knew now that she had no intention of telling him the real reason behind her intervention. He sensed, too, that his interview with her was at an end. He was about to rise from the table and excuse himself when the door was suddenly flung open. A dripping man hurled himself headlong into the room; Atwell recognized him as the native who had guided him from the jail.

"Señorita! Señorita!" the native cried shrilly.

The young woman regarded the intruder coolly over her cup, moving not a muscle. "Yes, Juan. What is it?"

With much waving of his hands, the native delivered his message, speaking in Spanish and so swiftly that Atwell caught only an occasional word. The American glanced at his hostess. She sat rigid, her face gone suddenly white. The cup she held slipped from her hand, crashed to bits on the table. She glanced down at the fragments in surprise and then rose swiftly from her chair.

"Word of your escape has leaked, señor," she said, tersely. "The *soldados* are searching. They will come here. If they find you—" She waved her hand with an expressive gesture of futility and she paused an instant, looking up at him appealingly. "I am sorry, señor. I am desolated. But—for your own safety and mine—you will have to leave."

The rain still beat on the windows; the wind still moaned around the eaves and through the trees at the front of the house. Outside was darkness, a hostile city, unknown dangers on every hand. Atwell nodded wearily.

"I shall go immediately, señorita."

CHAPTER XII

It was only by the most violent effort of will that Atwell forced himself to move. Not until he had stood up from the table had he realized how utterly weary he was. To venture out into the storm again, to face that unknown darkened city, seemed almost beyond his powers.

"You should go at once to the American consulate," Dolores advised hurriedly. "The soldiers will not dare arrest you there and you can stave them off until Señor Cunningham gets back. A consulate is sanctuary, you know. The police cannot arrest you without due process of law. And that takes time, even in Andegoya."

"But you? What will they do to you, if it is known that you got me out of jail?" Atwell demanded, suddenly realizing that his responsibilities did not end with himself alone.

"They cannot know that," Señorita de Rico answered easily. "All they can know is that you came here when you got out. There is nothing to connect me with the forged release. Besides, they would not dare to harm me. Xavier Juarte is too good a friend of mine."

"You are sure they will not try to arrest you?"

"Certain, señor."

"Very well," Atwell assented. "Where is the consulate?"

"Go four blocks down the street. Then turn to your left for two blocks. It is a large white house. You cannot miss it. Your bag I shall send over tomorrow. Now you must hurry, señor."

Atwell took her hand, bowed, and then impulsively kissed the tips of her fingers. "Señorita, a thousand thanks for all you have done for me! If I can ever be of service in any way, you need only call on me. Good night."

The waiting native guided him to the door by which he had entered, opened it cautiously and peered out into the darkness. "I can see no one," he said. "But you must hurry, señor."

"I shall. Thank you."

Lowering his head before the fury of the storm, Atwell hastened out onto the walk at the side of the house. He heard the door close behind him and paused a moment, trying to get his bearings and to accustom his eyes to the darkness.

"Four blocks down the street and two blocks to the left," he mused. "Well, here's luck."

He started off slowly toward the street, literally feeling his way through the murk. Several times he stumbled into clumps of shrubbery, deluging himself with water. The house was darkened now and, without the light which had filtered through its windows, he had difficulty in keeping on the graveled path. Gradually, as he worked his way forward, his eyes

became more used to the darkness and he could distinguish objects several feet away.

Not until he neared the gate at the front of the house, however, did he become conscious that he was not alone. He saw no one. He heard neither voices nor footfalls above the roar of the storm. Nevertheless, something told him that he was being watched by keener eyes than his own. A sudden panic swept over him as he saw again that squalid cell in the *carcel*, that bullet-dented wall in the jail *patio*.

He was free now. He determined to keep his freedom at all costs. If it were a question of fight, he'd fight—he'd shown these Andegoyans once that an American knew how to handle his fists and he'd show 'em again. He started forward resolutely, determine that a bold front would be his best weapon.

He was two paces from the gate when he heard a sharp voice ring out above the storm. "Stop, señor! I will shoot to keel!"

Atwell paused, staring into the black mass of shrubbery from which the voice had come. He could discern no one; and by the same token he knew that his own form presented a poor target in the uncertain light.

"Shoot and be damned!" he said tersely, and leaped for the gate.

Two shots followed him; they were fired, he knew from their sound, by a pistol of small caliber. He felt little fear as he threw open the gate. It would

take a good marksman and a mighty good gun to bring him down.

Then, as though they had been hidden in deep grass and were rising to charge, he made out a dozen or more *soldados* closing in on the gate. Swiftly they loomed out of the night, one after another, seemingly on all sides of him. He debated an instant, wondering if it might not be best to retreat. But such a course, he realized at once, would probably result in his becoming hopelessly lost—and to become lost in this storm-swept city, with its myriad dangers, could not possibly end in anything but his capture.

Atwell lowered his head. Had the light been better the men who faced him would have seen that he was smiling grimly. They would not have seen, however, the picture that was before his eyes at that very moment, a picture of a line of red-shirted warriors backed against gleaming white goal posts, of green turf beneath his feet, of shouting thousands on every side.

Atwell lowered himself until his left hand touched the ground. Crouched, waiting tensely as though for a football to be snapped to him, he watched the soldiers close in swiftly toward him. Then he leaped forward. A catapult could not have hurled him with more force.

His right arm, stiffened before him, struck a native in the chest and sent the man flying backwards. Then he was in their midst. He made no attempt to use his fists, depending solely on the momentum of

his charge. He plowed through the throng of *soldados* as though they had been paper men, knocking them down, trampling them under his feet. There seemed to be hundreds of them. In reality there were less than a score.

But when he broke through them at last and saw the street was clear before him, he was still grinning.

"Thank heaven these natives don't play football!" he thought. "One good tackler could have stopped me."

He dashed along the street, conscious of a great tumult of shouting behind him. A dozen shots were fired, without effect. He had covered less than a block when he knew that there was not a real runner in the crowd. Another block and their shouting was barely audible above the storm. Atwell slowed down, glancing over his shoulder and laughing softly.

"If the dredger fails, I might get a job teaching these natives how to run," he grinned to himself. "They could certainly stand some instruction."

Atwell was still running when he reached the fourth cross street from Señorita de Rico's home. Obedient to her instructions, he turned to the left and ran two blocks. Then he stopped, wiped the rain from his eyes and looked about for a white house. He saw none. The only dwelling in sight was an unpainted shack with a kerosene lamp in the window. Hardly the consulate, he told himself.

He walked half a block further, crossing and re-

crossing the street, peering anxiously at every dwelling. All of them were like the first, little more than hovels, unpainted, weather-beaten.

"H-m, must have passed it," he told himself.

He turned and started back along the path he had come. He reached the cross street, took his bearings from the shack with the lamp in the window, and retraced his steps for a full block. He was becoming a bit panic-stricken now. Not one of the houses that lined the street was white; not one seemed a suitable residence for an American consul.

He paused at last to think over the situation. Carefully he went over in his mind the course he had taken since leaving the señorita's home. He recalled the cross street at her house. He remembered the four other cross streets. He had turned to his left on the fourth, just as she had instructed, and gone two blocks. Nevertheless, there was no white house in the immediate neighborhood.

Then it dawned upon him. She had told him to go *down* the street. Although the street had been level, she had evidently meant for him to go toward the city. And he, having no bearings to guide his steps, unable to see in the storm, had gone in the wrong direction.

Atwell hesitated a moment, debating whether to attempt to find his way to the consulate by a direct route or to circle around past the señorita's home and the *soldados*. If he pursued the former course he might become lost; if he tried to go back the way

he had come, he stood a good chance of meeting that mob of constabulary, which by this time had probably been reinforced.

He was still wondering which would prove the lesser of the two evils when he saw a light swing around the corner a block away. Another followed, and another.

"H-m! So I failed to give them the slip!" he reflected. "All right, boys. You saved me the trouble of making up my mind. I can't go back the way I came. So I'll have to try a new route. Let's see. Back to the shack with the lamp in it. Then eight blocks to my left. That ought to bring me there. Let's go."

He hurried off, glancing over his shoulder as he ran. The lights behind him were not moving fast. Apparently the soldiers were searching for him. A disquieting thought struck him. Suppose there should be several hundred of them! Suppose they should spread out all over that section of the city! It wouldn't be safe to charge through a group of them again. They might suspect what was coming and start shooting before he got under way.

He quickened his footsteps, fairly flying over the cobbled streets. He knew there was no time to be lost. Reaching the house with the light in the window, he turned to his left and raced down the street. He covered a block.

"Seven more," he counted as he ran. "Seven, Seven. Seven."

He brought up suddenly, just in time to avoid

crashing into a high board fence. He peered intently to right and left and knew instantly what had happened. He'd blundered into a blind alley. All of the streets in that section of the city weren't cut through. There was nothing left to do but retrace his steps to the first cross street and cross over to another block. He turned, just in time to see a light loom out of the rain behind him.

He dared not hesitate. Another moment might mean his discovery. Grasping the top of the fence, he vaulted over it, landing with a crash on something that he learned immediately was a duck coop. A furious quacking rang out above the storm. To Atwell's anxious ears, it seemed that the sound would travel for miles. He leaped across the yard, intent on putting as much space as possible between himself and those particular ducks.

He came to another fence, leaped over it. He repeated the process several times, falling over unseen and unidentified objects, gaining his feet, breathlessly plunging on.

He stopped only when his crying lungs and aching limbs told him that he could go no further. He was in an alley now, or it might be a street. He had no means of knowing. Every sense of direction was lost. The consulate might be ahead of him, it might be behind him, it might be any place.

Hemmed in by driving rain on every side, he was conscious of only one fact: he was lost, irrevocably and completely lost.

CHAPTER XIII

"ARE you sure nothing has come in from Washington?" To Phyllis Montague it seemed almost the hundredth time that evening she had asked the same question.

"No. Nothing," the operator informed her patiently. "And there will not be anything until morning. I am closing the wire now."

Almost fearfully Phyllis glanced at the clock. It was midnight. She sighed, buttoned her raincoat up around her neck and walked slowly out into the street. It was still raining heavily, as only it can rain in the tropics, but she did not feel the drops beating on her face. As her weary feet turned toward the *carcel*, her thoughts were on Bob Atwell.

Her experience during the months she had been in Andegoya had been many and varied. But never had she been faced with an ordeal as unpleasant as the task which faced her now. To confront the young American, to tell him that his last hope had been shattered, was almost more than she was equal to. She visioned the hours ahead, silent, painful hours in the gloom of Atwell's cell. She saw the guards coming just before six the next morning, saw him led away, heard the muffled shots in the courtyard.

Her heart was very weary, yet her footsteps never

lagged. She climbed the steps of the jail resolutely. Four or five *soldados* dashed excitedly past her and she wondered vaguely what had happened. When she reached the keeper's office, she found it in a ferment of excitement. *Soldados* were dashing hither and yon; the fat, florid keeper was very red and blustery; two or three men whom she recognized as government officials were arguing vehemently.

The girl paused on the threshold, suddenly irresolute in the face of all this disorder and excitement. The keeper caught sight of her.

"The bird has flown," he called. "Released—by a forged order. See?" Excitedly he waved a paper in the air. "I ask you, señorita, does the signature not look genuine to you? Could any one have told that the order was not authentic? Would not you, were you in my place—"

Phyllis turned and groped her way from the office. A great feeling of relief surged over her; hot blood coursed through her veins, warming her chilled body. Weariness and heartache were gone, dissipated by the keeper's terse announcement. Feeling like a little girl who has been given a boon beyond her fondest dreams, she wanted very much to cry. Indeed, a few tears did course down her rain-wet cheeks as she hailed the ancient driver of a dilapidated cab, told him her destination, and climbed into the damp interior of the vehicle.

Her only emotion during the long drive to the consulate was one of relief. How Atwell's release

had been effected, who had forged the order, his present whereabouts—these questions never entered her head. She was content to lean back on the lumpy cushions, secure in the knowledge that, for the time being at least, he was safe.

Reaching the consulate, she paid the driver, hurried inside and removed her dripping coat and hat. Then she ran up the stairs, paused before the door of her father's room, opened it cautiously. The light was still burning. She entered quietly. Montague, who had been dozing, roused at the sound of her footsteps and sat up quickly in bed. He was a small man, very gray and thin of face, with the unhealthy pallor of one who spends much of his time indoors.

"What did the department say, Phyllis?" he asked quickly.

"Nothing. There was no word when the cable office closed."

"Then—"

The girl shook her head, a half smile on her lips. "No. He was released some time before midnight."

"Released!"

"Yes. By a forged order. I just came from the jail. They are all worked up over it. Several officials were there, arguing with the keeper. It seems that he failed to recognize the forgery until it was too late."

"Well, well, well," the little consul mused thoughtfully. "A forged order, eh?" Montague's brain, unlike his daughter's, moved in a well ordered

line. With hardly a pause he asked: "Who do you suppose would forge such an order?"

Phyllis started; she had not given a thought to that phase of the question. But, now that her father brought it up, she asked herself who there was who would risk imprisonment to save Atwell's life. Only his partner, Cunningham; and Cunningham had not returned to the city. Suddenly, however, she recalled Dolores de Rico. She had seen the woman as she had left Atwell's cell that morning. She knew that it must have been Señorita de Rico who had induced de Golia to plead the American's case.

Further, she knew that Dolores de Rico was little more than an adventuress. Indeed, everybody in Condota knew that. What more natural than that the woman should be connected in some way with the gun-running enterprise? For that matter, she might be behind the plot to overthrow President Quilla; rumors of such a plot had been current for months.

Phyllis Montague's face grew suddenly white and she sat down on a chair beside her father's bed. The old man, watching her and waiting for an answer to his question, was immediately solicitous.

"You are worn out, Phyllis. You must go to bed at once. You have worked too hard on this case. And after all, you know, the young man is probably guilty. The evidence, as you recounted it to me after the trial, was pretty strong against him. I'll admit that the punishment is rather severe for the crime. But it is the law of the republic. Without such a

law to keep these hot-blooded Latins in check, there would be one revolution after another."

The consul rested an affectionate hand on the damp coils of her golden hair. "You'd better go to bed now, my dear. And please don't worry over it any more. The man is undoubtedly guilty."

Phyllis made no response for the moment. Her head was bowed. The very thought her father had voiced was running through her mind. Yes, Atwell must be guilty. As deeply as it hurt her to admit it, she was forced at last to his conclusion. Up to that moment she had held her judgment in abeyance. He might be guilty; he might not—her only thought had been that he was an American and she must do all in her power to help him.

But if Dolores de Rico had been responsible for that forged release—and it seemed certain that Atwell had no other friend in the city—it was almost a foregone conclusion that the man was connected with the gun-running plot. Bitterly she recalled Atwell's earnestness as he had pleaded his innocence. It seemed hardly credible that a man, particularly a man of this type, could lie so freely and so deliberately.

Phyllis rose at last, dazed a bit by the conclusions at which she had been forced to arrive, heart-sick and bitter. She kissed her father constrainedly. "Good night, dad. I hope you'll feel better in the morning."

"Good night, Phyllis. Try to get a good sleep."

He watched her until she switched off the light, a worried look in his pale gray eyes.

Phyllis went to her room but she did not go to bed at once. She removed her outer clothing abstractedly, took off her wet shoes and stockings, donned a robe and slippers. For some time she sat on the edge of her bed. Sleep was far away. An indefinable restlessness possessed her spirit. Disquieting and conflicting thoughts raced through her mind.

Her first and paramount emotion was a poignant hurt, a vague resentment. Atwell had seemed so honest, so sincere. Despite the fact that she had never admitted his innocence, even to herself, it hurt her deeply to think that he had brazenly lied to her. And he must have lied, she told herself again and again—there could be no other explanation of the forged release and Señorita de Rico's interest in him.

In time the bitterness passed; as she came to view the situation more philosophically peace came to her harried mind. After all, Atwell had only himself to blame. He must have known the law. He must have known that he risked his life when he attempted to smuggle arms into the country. Why should she waste her sympathy on him?

And yet, deep in her heart, a small voice told her that Robert Atwell was an American. He was alone, almost friendless, in a strange and hostile land. Indeed, how could she claim allegiance to the United States and still be anything but his friend, ready and willing to do all in her power to aid him?

More composed and at ease, Phyllis made ready for bed. Switching off the light, she went to the window and debated an instant whether or not to open it. The wind, however, was coming from the opposite direction and there was little likelihood of its shifting. She threw the window wide and stood looking out over the city for a moment. For the first time that evening the rain was abating a bit. She could distinguish lights that were several blocks away. Even the gray cobbles of the street before her house were faintly visible.

Viewed from her window, the city had always terrified her a little. It was so unlike American cities. It was so dark, so strange, so full of mystery. Now, wind-swept and wet, it filled her with a vague uneasiness. She was glad she was home, out of the rain and wind and darkness. Here, at least, were peace and rest—and safety.

A disquieting thought struck her. Somewhere out in that bleak, hostile city was Robert Atwell. She remembered the *soldados* she had seen rushing from the *carcel*. They were searching for him now. The city was being combed from end to end. Hundreds of them had joined in the hunt by now. And Robert Atwell, an American, was fleeing for his life.

Her heart suddenly went out to him. What matter if he had broken the law by smuggling a few arms into the country? He was an American. He was in distress. She wished mightily that she could help him.

Phyllis was about to turn away from the window when a movement in the street at the front of the house caught her eye. A man was walking slowly toward the consulate. Her heart leaped. Could it be— But no, it was only a *soldado*; even in the dim light she recognized his faded khaki uniform. She stood there a moment, wondering what had brought a *soldado* to the vicinity of the consulate. Ordinarily they were rarely to be seen in that district. Then her keen eyes, peering anxiously down the street, saw another soldier and then another. In all she made out eight or ten of them; they seemed to have surrounded the house.

The reason for their presence dawned swiftly. Robert Atwell, once he was free, would make for the sanctuary of the consulate. It was the one place in all Condota where he would be safe, for the time being, at least. No *soldado* would dare attempt to take him into custody here; his arrest could only be accomplished after lengthy diplomatic overtures. The officials, knowing that the fugitive would attempt to gain the consulate, had ordered it surrounded.

Angry a bit now—although afterward she was forced to admit that she had no cause for being angry at officials who were merely trying to uphold the law of their land—she turned from the window. She had taken only a step or two toward the bed when she heard the faint report of a gun. Several other shots followed in quick succession. Her form stif-

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fened. Her face went white as she sensed the import of that shooting.

Somewhere out there in the darkness, only a few blocks away, to judge from the reports, the *soldados* were shooting at Robert Atwell.

CHAPTER XIV

It was nearly two o'clock that morning and, at last reports, Robert Atwell was still at large, when James Hackwood and Xavier Juarteiz mounted the steps of Señorita de Rico's home. Although it had practically ceased raining, both men were dripping, attesting to the fact that they had been out in the height of the storm. They appeared nervous, too; particularly the *entendente*. The tall governor strode restlessly back and forth on the porch and, when his ring was not answered at once, he showed exasperation at the delay.

"We should not have come at this hour, Hackwood," he remarked at last, speaking in Spanish. "She will be in bed, of course."

"Then we will get her out of bed," Hackwood returned shortly.

"It is not very polite," the governor asserted.

"Politeness be damned! We are going to have it out with her sometime. It might as well be now."

"But the hour, Hackwood!"

"As good as any other," the mahogany operator growled.

At this point a sleepy-eyed servant opened the door a scant inch and peered out at them. Recognizing the visitors, he opened the door hastily and admitted them.

"Convey our apologies to Señorita de Rico," Hackwood ordered, "and tell her we would like to see her immediately."

"The señorita has retired, sir," the servant gasped.

"Take her the message," Hackwood commanded, and strode on into the hall and thence into the living room. He knew the position of the switch and turned on the lights.

Juarteز followed close behind him, though with less assurance. His dark eyes were on Hackwood as the latter slipped off his coat and dropped into a chair. The expression in the governor's eyes was not pleasant. There was a hint of jealousy in them, a hint even of hatred. Companions in crime though they might be, there was little love lost between them. Hackwood, plainly, was the leader, the stronger of the two. And Juarteز, the governor, the proud aristocrat, irked under the bondage of a will greater than his own.

Then, too, the question of leadership was not all that irked Juarteز. There were affairs of the heart. Such pastimes came last with James Hackwood, trailing far behind matters of business. But not so with the governor. To him they came first, always. Business would wait, but love would not. In these matters they differed; in their talents for roguery they did not.

The governor removed his coat and hat, wiped the moisture from his face, made an attempt at bringing the part back to his hair and sat down. He did not

relax, as Hackwood had done. He seemed ill at ease, crossing and recrossing his legs several times. At last he spoke.

"Are you positive—that she is responsible?" he questioned hesitantly.

Hackwood shrugged. "Who else?"

"But her motive?"

"That is what we have come to find out," Hackwood answered shortly.

"Maybe she—likes the boy," Juarteiz suggested.

"Hell!" the other grunted contemptuously. "She is not the kind to fall in love with a kid scarcely out of short trousers. Guess again, governor."

That was exactly what the governor had been doing, for more than an hour and quite without convincing results. He said as much to his companion.

"Why waste your time?" Hackwood retorted. "There is no accounting for a woman's whim, not by any mere man, at least. In this case, however, you may take it for granted that she had a mighty good reason for forging that release. Our little friend has something up her sleeve, governor. And I, for one, am going to find out. If she is planning to double cross us—"

Hackwood waved his hand expressively, without completing the sentence. The governor's eyes narrowed. His hatred of James Hackwood was growing hourly. When he spoke, he tried to speak calmly, though hot blood was coursing through his veins.

"After all, I do not see that this man's escape mat-

ters greatly. It seems to me that you are trying to make a mountain out of a mole hill. It can hardly affect our plans to any degree."

"Can't it now?" Hackwood growled angrily, lapsing into English. "I know damned well that this young fool knows who was responsible for those guns being aboard the *Mazatlan*. He knows that I am mixed up in the affair. And his partner, who, by the way, is a mighty wise *hombre*, has probably got a pretty strong hunch that you're mixed up in it too. And Shorty Cunningham and the president, as you may know, are closer together than a couple of turtle doves at mating time. With Atwell and Cunningham roaming around the country loose, we stand a good chance of having the whole game queered for us. Now try and tell me Atwell's escape doesn't cut any ice!"

Juarteز nodded hastily. He rarely disagreed openly with Hackwood. Experience had taught him that such a course was not only hopeless but often brought on unpleasant complications. Hackwood had as yet found no method of controlling the governor's thoughts, however, and right now Juarteз was regretting their intrusion on the privacy of Señorita de Rico. He glanced furtively at his watch. Two o'clock. A fine time to be calling on a lady! Tomorrow would have done just as well.

A footfall sounded in the hallway. Hackwood addressed the governor tersely in English. "You keep out of this now. I'll handle her."

A moment later Señorita de Rico, clad in a dull red dressing gown, stood surveying the two men from the doorway. Her dark eyes were mildly questioning. Her manner, while not exactly cordial, was assured, well poised. The two men rose hastily, the governor smiling a rather sickly smile, Hackwood stern and matter-of-fact.

"Good evening, gentlemen," the young woman said calmly. "Or perhaps I should say good morning. I have been asleep so long I hardly know whether it is evening or morning."

While they answered her greeting—Hackwood coolly, Juarteز apologetically—she crossed the room to the single large fixture which supported the lights. She raised her arm, found it too short to reach the lamps. Juarteز was at her side in an instant.

"All but one, if you please," she said steadily. "A bright light is so hard on the eyes, especially after one has been asleep."

Hackwood's jaw set as he watched the governor switch off the lamps until only one remained, leaving the room almost in semi-darkness. He well knew that it was not her eyes that bothered Dolores de Rico; it was her conscience. And she, clever woman, was taking no chances in undergoing a third degree in a light that would reveal her every facial expression.

"And now, my friends," she said, turning to them casually. "What brings you here to interrupt my beauty sleep?"

Juarteز looked at Hackwood and nervously shifted

his weight from one foot to the other. The latter did not speak at once, but stood regarding the woman with a measuring glance. His feet were wide apart. His hands were thrust in the damp pockets of his trousers. His strange gray eyes were very intent and searching.

"Dolores, why did you forge that release?" he demanded abruptly.

Her surprise was excellently simulated. "Release! Why, I do not understand you! I forged no release."

"No? I suppose you do not know that young Atwell was released from jail to-night on a forged order." Hackwood's voice was sharp with sarcasm.

"Atwell?" the young woman mused calmly. "The name is familiar. Oh, yes, I remember now. The young man to whom you introduced us on the night of your return. Now what is it you say about him? I do not quite understand."

Because he had a better command of the idiom, Hackwood turned back to English. "Dolores, don't be a damned fool!" he said shortly. Juarteiz half rose from his chair, his white teeth bared. The other waved him aside with an angry gesture. "I happen to know that you visited Atwell in his cell yesterday morning. You were free with your bribes—you always are, Dolores—but your countrymen have a strange habit of accepting more than one bribe. I know, too, that you induced de Golias to act as counsel for this American. Now I want to know

why. And if you know which side your bread is buttered on, you'll tell me. Come clean, Dolores! What's your little game?"

Señorita de Rico turned to English too, not because she had a better command of it, but because she could speak it more slowly without being too obvious in her search for an answer.

"Very well," she said softly, a faint smile on her rose-petal lips, "since you have been so kind as to pry into my affairs, I shall admit everything you say—except the forgery. Of course I cannot admit that."

"If you admit the others, then you admit the forgery, too," Hackwood snapped. "In the first place, no one else would have done it. And in the second place, no one else has the influence to put it over. However, that doesn't matter. We have no intention of bringing any charges against you, Dolores. What we are here for is to find out why you did it. We deemed it necessary that young Atwell be put out of the way. You know why, as well as I do. Now why did you gum up our plans?"

Dolores de Rico met his gaze for an instant and then dropped her eyes. At the moment she seemed very young and childish and innocent, far too innocent to be forced to endure such a third degree. Juarteiz writhed in his chair, hardly able to control himself. If ever he and his fellow conspirators were near a break, this was the time.

Demurely the señorita asked: "Must I bare the

innermost secrets of my heart? Must I lay my soul naked for you men to feast your eyes upon?"

"Rot!" Hackwood growled. "We're not discussing hearts and souls, Dolores! We're discussing the reason behind the forgery of that release. What was it?"

Her eyes still downcast, she made answer: "I—I love him!"

Hackwood laughed harshly. It was a false note, like the shrill squawk of a gallery rough at the tensest moment of a play. Dolores' shapely head snapped up. There was fire in her eyes now. Her breast heaved. Her voice was passionate with anger and emotion. Consummate actress was Dolores.

"How dare you come here and laugh at me! You, who call yourself a gentleman, to force me to such an admission and then laugh! Is it wrong to love a man? Is it wrong to admire a man who is honest and clean and moral? Have I committed any crime in loving Robert Atwell, in doing all I could to save his life, in risking imprisonment to save him from punishment for a crime he did not commit? And yet you, an American gentleman, come to my home at this hour in the morning! You browbeat me, you swear at me, you treat me like a common woman of the streets. Why? Because I have been so indiscreet as to fall in love with a man who is so much worthier than you that it would be repellent to him to wipe his boots on you." She paused, the tears of anger streaming down her pale cheeks. "Gentlemen,

good night! My servant will show you to the door."

Regally, majestically, she swept out of the room. She left the governor blinking in dazed consternation. Hackwood's only feeling was anger and pique. He jerked up his hat and overcoat.

"Come on, governor," he snapped. "The act is over."

It was not until they were on the steps that Juarteز spoke. "What—what do you think about it?" he asked bewilderedly.

"I don't think anything about it," Hackwood returned tersely. "I know. The woman is lying. She doesn't love Atwell any more than I love the queen of Siam. A deliberate lie, to conceal—well, God knows what intention!"

There was a smile of pardonable pride on the lips of Dolores de Rico as she covertly watched their departure from the window of her darkened room.

CHAPTER XV

IN a turmoil of anxiety, first sympathizing for Atwell and then berating herself for sympathizing with such a man, Phyllis Montague stood shivering in her window for more than an hour. After the first shot and the sporadic volley that followed it, she heard no more shooting. She had no way of knowing whether Atwell had been shot, captured or was still at large. She hoped that he had not been taken. Indeed, there were times when she felt almost positive of it, for the fact that the soldiers still guarded the consulate gave credence to the belief.

Then again she saw him being dragged back to the *carcel*. She saw him hurled into that filthy cell. She saw him lying on the cot, probably sorely wounded, waiting hopelessly for the hour when they would take him out into the *patio*. Several times she was on the point of dressing and going back to the jail. She had promised to stay with him during those last hours. She wanted to keep that promise, despite the suffering and heartache she knew it would cost her. She was willing to pay the price, however little it might lighten his burden.

But each time she was about to turn away from the window, her eyes rested on the *soldados* before the house. Surely, she told herself, they would not be keeping guard if Atwell had been captured.

Surely word would be sent to them and they would give up their vigil.

And so, for more than an hour, she had stood there, alternately torn by doubt and fear, praying that Atwell might elude his pursuers, hating herself for voicing such a prayer.

Indeed, she scarcely moved until she heard her door opened and a low voice behind her. She turned swiftly, peering through the gloom with startled eyes. Against the white door she saw the faint outline of her father's faded bath robe.

"Dad!" she exclaimed anxiously. "You shouldn't be out of bed!"

Montague did not answer as he strode to her side and put his arm about her slender waist. He held her close for an instant, staring into her eyes.

"Phyllis, what is the matter?" he asked gently.

The girl trembled despite her efforts at self-control. It was silly to get worked up like this over an almost total stranger, she tried to assure herself. Yet she continued to tremble. And she knew, too, that she was very likely to cry. She tried to find words to answer her father's question but her lips refused to move.

"Do you feel badly about it, dear?"

The words came in a rush then. "Oh, dad, I never felt so miserable in my life! The soldiers are guarding the house to keep him from coming here. They're hunting him out, dad, like he was a wounded beast in the jungle. A little while ago there was

shooting. I don't know whether he's been killed or wounded or captured or what has happened. I can't keep my mind off him. I can't help seeing him wandering around in the darkness and the rain in this hostile city. Or captured and taken back to the prison. I see him lying there in that filthy cell, waiting out the long hours until they—"

The girl's voice broke. She sobbed hysterically, clinging to her father. "Dad! Dad! Isn't there something we can do? I—I'll lose my mind if I have to wait here the rest of the night, never knowing what has happened, never knowing whether he is alive or dead."

Montague led her to the bed, forced her to sit down, and threw a heavy cloak over her shoulders. "There! There! You must calm yourself, Phyllis," he consoled. "He is only a stranger, a ne'er-do-well. He can't mean so much as all that to you."

"Oh, but it isn't that, dad. It's just that he is an American. And he is friendless. And those soldiers are hunting him down like a pack of wolves." She clenched her small fists, beating them futilely against the bed. "Oh, how I hate them! How I hate this terrible country! If they kill him, dad, I won't stay here another minute."

It was all a little hard for Montague to understand. Thirty years in the diplomatic service had steeled his nerves against this sort of thing, had hardened his sensibilities. He saw nothing so very terrible

in the execution of a man, even of an American, who had deliberately broken the laws of a country, particularly when that man must have known that he would pay with his life if he were caught. It was regrettable, to be sure. It was unpleasant. The sentence was severe and he'd gladly have done anything in his power to have it commuted. But it was no occasion for hysterics.

He tried to calm his daughter. However, much of his life had been spent away from her, while she had been in school in the States and his knowledge of handling hysterical young women was meager. He pleaded with her, he chided her, he ridiculed her, he reasoned with her. It was all to no avail. The more he talked, the harder she sobbed, the more forceful became her condemnation of a country that would execute a man for smuggling.

"But don't you realize, dear," he pointed out, "that the execution of just one such man may be the means of saving hundreds of lives that would otherwise be lost in a revolution? The law is fair, Phyllis; it is not only fair, but it is widely known. He went into this thing with his eyes open. He knew what he was doing. He knew the penalty if he were caught."

"But he may be innocent!" Phyllis cried.

"The evidence—"

"Evidence doesn't mean so much. He may be the victim of a plot. He swears that he is."

"Do you really think he had nothing to do with this?" her father asked quietly.

Phyllis hesitated, recalling Dolores de Rico's connection with the affair. She did not answer the question—she could not answer it truthfully without admitting that she was almost certain of Atwell's guilt. Instead of speaking, she burst into an uncontrollable fit of sobbing. Montague held her close, waiting for it to pass.

Some one shouted excitedly in the street below. The girl's form stiffened; her breath came in short snatches, like a child's who has cried itself weary.

"What—was that?" she asked in a whisper.

"It was nothing," Montague assured her. "Just one of the soldiers shouting to another."

The words were hardly spoken when pandemonium broke loose in the front of the house. A dozen men shouted at once. A pistol cracked. Another answered like an echo.

Phyllis and her father leaped to the window. The storm had passed. A crescent moon was just rising above the hills to the eastward. In the faintly greenish light that bathed the street they saw a man running toward the consulate.

He was running as they had probably never seen a man run before. Bent well forward, his white fists flashing at his sides like pistons, he was racing along the street with a speed that was incredible. Swerving first to one side and then to the other, like a football player making a long run through a broken field, he shot past the soldiers who ran to intercept him as though they had been standing still.

One gun after another barked, some of them so close that the muzzles almost touched him. But still he ran, as impervious to the bullets of the *soldados* as though a charm hung over him. Phyllis screamed again and again. It seemed almost a certainty that he would be killed. She wanted to cover her eyes, to hide what to her would seem but a wanton murder—never realizing the deceptiveness of moonlight, the notoriously poor marksmanship of the *soldados*. But her hands were leaden; she could neither raise them to her eyes nor could she turn away.

Then the runner fell, sliding along the slippery street like a deer she had once seen killed in full flight.

"Dad! They've killed him!" Phyllis cried. Mercifully her eyes closed over the fearful scene; she clutched her father hysterically.

"No! He's up again!" Montague shouted excitedly. "He's running! He's almost at the gate! He struck one of those soldiers. Knocked him ten feet! Gad! What a man! A human tornado! Devoid of fear! Phyllis! Phyllis! Look at him go! Did you ever see such speed in a human being? Did you—"

"The door!" Phyllis cried suddenly, leaping from her father's arms. "I'll open—the door!"

She burst out of the room, along the hallway, down the stairs. Near the bottom she stumbled, fell, picked herself up and raced to the front door. She

threw it open and dropped back out of the way just as Atwell staggered in.

The man did not see her at once. He slammed the door shut and stood facing it. Although he cursed softly, between gasps for breath, his face was wreathed in a broad grin. Then he saw the girl, where she stood leaning weakly against the wall. Involuntarily he reached for his hat, forgetting that he wore none.

"I—I beg—your pardon," he said pantingly.

Phyllis laughed involuntarily, not because she saw anything humorous but more as a result of reflex action brought on by the overwhelming sense of relief that swept over her. Indeed, even had she been herself, she might have laughed anyway. For Robert Atwell was as sorry a picture of a man as she had ever seen.

His clothes were wet through. He was spattered with mud from head to foot. One trouser leg, torn nearly off, flapped open at the knee. His collar was gone; his tie hung over his shoulder like a limp string. Somewhere he had lost his coat. His torn shirt hung down over his trousers, giving him the appearance of a very dirty and very dilapidated Chinaman.

His thoughts, however, were not on his personal appearance. Jerking his head toward the front of the house, he asked: "Will they—come in here—after me?"

Phyllis shook her head, undecided whether to laugh or cry. "No. They dare not do that."

Atwell sighed with relief and the fire seemed to go out of his eyes. He was suddenly very weary and worn. "I've been—through hell!" he said softly, almost as though he were speaking to himself. "Lost. . . . I've been lost—for hours. . . . Soldiers everywhere. . . . I couldn't find the consulate. . . . Searched and searched . . . and searched. . . . Stumbled on it by accident . . . just when I was ready to give up. . . . God! It's been hell!"

"May I ask where you played football?" The voice was as cool and steady as though the speaker were making a remark about the weather.

Atwell's head jerked up. His gaze met the steady gray eyes of a small man in a faded bath robe. The younger man shook himself.

"California, sir," he said, striving to match the other's steadiness of tone with his own. "Class of '19."

The little man held out his hand. "I'm Montague, of '94."

The light of recognition came into Atwell's fast glazing eyes. He clasped the consul's hand warmly. "I remember, sir. At least, I remember hearing about you. Quarterback. Made a 58-yard place kick in the big game of '93. I'm mighty glad—"

At this point Phyllis thrust herself in front of her father. "Dad! Aren't you ashamed! Talking football when Mr. Atwell is almost dead! Can't you see that he is wounded, that he is almost ready to drop?"

"No," Atwell smiled feebly. "I'm not wounded.

Those beggars can't shoot for sour apples. They never touched me."

"But you fell. I saw you."

"Slipped. That's all."

"Your knee is bleeding," Phyllis told him.

He glanced down. "So it is. I hadn't noticed." Then realization of his appearance dawned upon his be-fogged brain. "Say, I'm awfully sorry to intrude upon you in this condition. But there wasn't much choice. When I left Señorita de Rico's home—"

Atwell broke off. Phyllis Montague's drawn face had gone white. He stared at her a moment wonderingly, while the girl tottered unsteadily on her feet. Then his hand went out, caught her arm.

"I'm afraid you're going to faint, Miss Montague," he said. "Can't I help you—"

Feebly Phyllis tried to push him away. Then her form relaxed. She fainted in his arms.

CHAPTER XVI

"THE situation is this," Montague began, at breakfast the following morning. "I have been cited to appear before the court this morning at eleven o'clock and show cause why I should not deliver you to the authorities. Of course, I shall not appear. I have a perfectly good excuse, having been ill for some time. I am not able to leave the house. I have no accredited representative to take my place—my daughter's work has been quite unofficial—and the court will have to wait until I am in condition to appear. That will be several days.

"In the meantime, your partner should be back from the capital. If, as you hope, he brings a pardon for you, there will be nothing more to worry about. They cannot even hold you for breaking jail, as you had nothing to do with forgery of the release."

The consul paused, watching Atwell across the table. They were alone, Phyllis having sent word that she was indisposed after the excitement and strain of the night before.

"By the way, Atwell. That forgery was rather a strange thing. Have you any idea—"

A slow shake of Atwell's head caused the consul to break off. "Yes," the young American admitted, "I have an idea who put it over. But I am pledged to

secrecy. I'm sorry, sir. I knew nothing about it until after my release."

Montague nodded thoughtfully, stirring his coffee the while. "An old friend, is she?" he asked casually after a moment.

Atwell colored in spite of himself. "I'd rather not discuss it, sir," he said with finality.

"Just as you say, Atwell," the consul returned quietly. "It is entirely your affair. Only I feel it my duty to warn you that in the event your partner fails to return with a pardon, I shall have to turn you over to the authorities. In the meantime, I am technically responsible for you. Will you give me your word not to try to escape?"

Atwell chuckled softly. "My dear sir, that is the last thing in the world I should try to do. One experience at that game is quite enough. I went through hell a hundred times last night. You can rest assured that I shall not leave this house until I am free or until you order me out. And needless to say, I am mighty grateful to you for taking me in this way and protecting me. I won't try to tell you that I had nothing to do with this gun-running affair. Your daughter has told you of the trial and you have formed your own opinions. But if ever—"

Montague waved his explanations aside. "Your guilt or innocence is no concern of mine. I am pledged to do all I can to aid Americans in this port. I should do the same for any one else."

Atwell made no response to this. He knew by the

coldness of the consul's tone that the latter believed him guilty, or at least implicated in some way. The knowledge hurt him immeasurably. Like all Americans of his type, he was possessed of the belief that he could tell a man's worth by looking at him. While neither vain nor conceited, he believed that Montague should be able to tell, after seeing him and talking to him, that he was not a ne'er-do-well gun-runner. Atwell either did not know or failed to take into consideration the fact that Montague had dealt with hundreds of young scapegoats who seemed just as clean-cut and honorable and prepossessing as Robert Atwell. A bit disillusioned was Theodore Montague, mayhap.

Breakfast over, Atwell was given the freedom of the consulate and cordially advised to make himself at home, while Montague repaired to his study to attend to some neglected correspondence. As the little consul departed, however, he remarked with real warmth: "Atwell, this has been rather an unpleasant business, all in all, but you did something last night that all the doctors in Condota have failed to do."

"What was that?" the other asked, a bit puzzled.

"Watching you make that run through the *soldados* made me feel better than I've felt in months. I haven't seen a run like that since my senior year in college. I got such a thrill out of it that I forgot all about being sick."

"Well, I'm glad some one got a thrill out of it,"

Atwell grinned in rather a sickly fashion. "I assure you that I was scared half to death."

Atwell's spirits were a little higher after that. Even if the consul did think he was guilty as charged, he at least gave him credit for knowing how to gain ground through a broken field. That was something, anyway.

Although it was well after nine when they finished breakfast, the morning passed slowly for Atwell. He felt restless and out of place, like an unwelcome guest. He knew that he wasn't exactly unwelcome—no, not exactly—but he wished heartily that there was some other place that he might stay until Shorty Cunningham arrived. He tried to read but he could not keep his mind on the printed page. His thoughts kept flying off at tangents; his own personal problems and questionings kept intruding.

Foremost among these was the still unsolved problem of why Señorita de Rico had taken such pains and such a risk to get him out of jail. The question kept cropping up in his mind. Again and again he went over everything that had passed between them and all that he had heard of her since first they had been introduced. And again and again his efforts to find a tangible clew to her interest in him proved fruitless.

Phyllis Montague worried him considerably, too, although he was forced to admit that there was no reason why she should. He rather suspected that she had failed to appear for breakfast more because he

was there than because of any ill effects of the night before. After all, it must have been rather embarrassing for her to wake up from a dead faint and find herself in his arms, as she had done last night. Of course, he'd only been carrying her up to her room and her father had been at his elbow all the time. Nevertheless dazed by weariness as his brain had been, he had sensed her embarrassment.

"Let's see now," he mused, as he lounged in a comfortable chair in the large drawing room. "That brings up the question of why she fainted. Excitement? H-m. It seems to me I mentioned something about Señorita de Rico just before she passed out. It couldn't have been that. Still— Now I wonder. . . . Oh, the devil! What's the use of puzzling about it? In a day or two I'll be up the river on the dredger and I may never see these people again as long as I live."

The thought gave him comfort, despite the fact that he knew it was not true. Right down in his heart he knew that he would see Phyllis Montague often in the future—at least, if he had anything to say about it. And as for Dolores de Rico—she hadn't gotten him out of jail for nothing.

Atwell's bag had been sent over to the consulate early that morning by Señorita de Rico. He whiled away an hour going over such of his clothing as still remained wearable and repacking it. Noon found him restless and chafing at the enforced inaction. His spirits rose a little, however, when he went down

to luncheon and found that Phyllis had preceded him into the dining room. He greeted her and was immediately struck by the coldness with which she returned his greeting.

Oh, well, he told himself, she probably wasn't feeling well. Her face was rather pale and her lips seemed drawn at the corners.

"I hope you're feeling better, Miss Montague," Atwell remarked as they sat down.

"Oh, I'm quite well, thank you." She did not smile as she said it, nor did she meet his gaze.

The consul, Atwell found, was in a much more friendly mood than at breakfast. He talked football and showed a surprising knowledge of current results and players. Indeed, he was far better versed on football than Atwell, who had been too busy with his dredgers the past few years to keep up with the game. Phyllis, beyond a few commonplaces, took no part in the conversation. Atwell was disappointed in a way. He had hoped to become better acquainted with this beautiful girl, if for no other purpose than to convince her that he was not the type of man who willingly broke the law.

After luncheon Montague again adjourned to his study, leaving Atwell and Phyllis alone. They sat a while in the living room, constrained and uncomfortable. Despite the rain of the night before, the heat was almost unbearable. Atwell remarked about it, more to make conversation than anything else.

"It is not nearly as hot as you'll find it up the river," the girl told him.

"You've been up there, have you?" he asked eagerly.

"A number of times. The governor has a mansion about twelve miles from here. He often gives parties up there, to which the various members of the diplomatic corps are usually invited."

Atwell nodded, wondering at the feeling of pique which came over him. Somehow, he didn't like the thought of Phyllis Montague's attending the governor's parties. They might be all right. They undoubtedly were all right, or her father would never take her. Oh, well, small wonder he had a distinct aversion toward the governor! Who wouldn't, under the circumstances?

"Our concession is just fourteen miles up the river," he remarked. "That can't be very far from the governor's place."

"It must begin where navigation ends," the girl told him. "The river is navigable by power boats only fourteen miles. After that one must travel in a canoe."

Atwell would have liked to have continued the conversation. Now that he was temporarily out of danger, he began to feel a birth of interest in the country. There were many questions that he wanted to ask. However, the girl's aloof manner, the strange coldness with which she spoke to him, her disinclination to meet his eyes, the patent air of disappointment

with which she regarded him—these things told him that the conversation was not solicited on her part.

So he lighted a cigarette and held his peace, sensing that only the demands of good form kept her in the room at all. In the morning she had had an excuse for leaving him to his own devices. Now she was virtually compelled to play the part of hostess, however distasteful that part might be.

Atwell stood the silence for some time, but at last it grew unbearable. He knew that he would either have to flee to another part of the house or—well, talk the whole thing over with her. He liked Phyllis. He wanted her respect. At last, when the ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece had become like the beating of a drum, he could hold himself in check no longer.

“Miss Montague, I know what your opinion of me is and know how distasteful it is to have to sit there and attempt to entertain me,” he declared impetuously. “I won’t try to tell you that I am innocent of this absurd charge. I have tried to convince you and I know that I have failed. I am sorry you have taken the attitude you have. It hurts rather deeply. Don’t think that I am blaming you in the least. It isn’t that. But—” he smiled ruefully—“it has been rather a blow to my pride. I guess if it weren’t for my pride, I wouldn’t think anything about it.

“However, what I started to say is merely this. I expect to be in this country for a considerable time.

Even though I shall be up the river most of the time, we shall be neighbors more or less. We are Americans. It is only natural that we shall meet frequently in a country where there are so few Americans of the right sort."

He met her gaze squarely, colored a bit and then went on earnestly: "I have come to this determination, Miss Montague. However much I may desire your friendship, I shall neither seek it nor accept it until I can come to you with proof that I had no connection with this gun-running business." He paused. "Is that fair, Miss Montague?"

Her gaze fell. Very white of face, she stared at the floor for a long moment. She was about to speak when the sudden sound of voices came to them from the hallway. Atwell rose from his chair, recognizing the deep tones of Shorty Cunningham. Straight and tense he stood, waiting for the news that practically meant life or death to him. If Shorty had failed to win a pardon from the president—

"Hello, Bob! Afternoon, Miss Montague!" Cunningham stood in the doorway. His face was flushed; his clothes travel-stained; he was breathing heavily. Then, as casually as though he were asking the time of day, his booming voice demanded:

"Say, Bob! What's this I hear about you and this de Rico woman?"

CHAPTER XVII

ROBERT ATWELL recoiled, almost as though he had been struck a physical blow. He knew that Shorty Cunningham was tactless and outspoken, but he had hardly been prepared for such a query. Indeed, if his partner had set about deliberately to ask an embarrassing and untimely question, he could not have succeeded more fully. Momentarily at a loss for words, Atwell could only stare bewilderedly at Cunningham.

The bluff mining man, however, did not seem to realize that his question was unanswered. He rushed on volubly. "I been in town a couple of hours, squaring things up for you. Heard all the gossip. They say this de Rico señorita forged an order for your release and got you out of the hoose-gow. Mighty lucky for you, eh, son? They figured on bumping you off this morning, didn't they? I never thought for a minute they'd rush things through so fast, or I wouldn't have gone away. Still, I guess it was best. I probably wouldn't have been able to do any good around here."

He whistled softly, grinning at his partner. "Mighty narrow escape you had, wasn't it? A fine introduction to the country. Guess it just about scared the daylights out of you. You still look a little white around the gills. But what I can't figure out is why

this de Rico woman should go to so much trouble to get you out. Of course, you're not hard for a woman to look at. But I never thought a dame like Dolores would fall for—"

At this point Cunningham broke off, conscious either of the agonized look on his partner's face or of the fact that it was not particularly good form to voice remarks of this kind before Phyllis Montague. Atwell, after one gulp that left him almost speechless, strove to get the situation in hand.

"You got the pardon, did you?" he asked unsteadily.

"Sure. Nothing to it. Juan Quilla may be old and lots of people say that as president he's the rocks, but the old boy knows his onions. He has a hunch who was behind that gun-running job, just as well as we have. But there's nothing he can do without evidence."

Atwell, however, was more concerned about his own pardon than he was with the worries of President Quilla. "Then I am supposed to be free, am I? May I go and come as I please, without fear of arrest?"

"Absolutely. You're as free as the wind that blows. However, so far as going and coming is concerned, you're starting up the river in five minutes. I've been away from the camp too long now. There is no telling what has happened while I've been gone. So collect your belongings, if you have any left after all this wild scrambling, and we'll get under way."

Atwell mumbled an apology to Phyllis and hurried from the room. Reaching the hall, he took his first deep breath in several minutes. Of all the blundering idiots he had ever known, Cunningham was the worst, he told himself as he mounted the stairs to his room. His partner could not have picked a more unpropitious time to mention Dolores de Rico. Atwell suspected that it was the señorita's connection with the affair that had caused Phyllis Montague to maintain her doubts of his innocence. And there Cunningham had to drag her into the conversation the first rattle out of the box!

Still, he reflected as he snapped his suitcase shut, Cunningham hadn't meant to be tactless. He had merely blurted out the thought that had been uppermost in his mind. Atwell could hardly find it in his heart to blame the man, particularly after all he had done for him. Shorty hadn't known of the situation between himself and Phyllis; he had blundered unwittingly. He might just as well make the best of the matter and forget Shorty's slip.

When Atwell went downstairs again he found Montague in conversation with Cunningham. Phyllis had left the room. Hurt more deeply than he at first realized, the young man expressed his thanks to the consul and made ready to depart. The latter shook hands warmly; he was cordiality itself.

"When you come down the river again, be sure and drop in on us, Atwell," he urged. "We're always

glad to see you and it will give us a chance to talk some more football."

"Thank you, sir," Atwell answered soberly. "I'll be glad to."

As they walked into the hall, Atwell glanced about almost eagerly. Phyllis, however, was not in sight. Cunningham's remarks about Señorita de Rico had evidently been the final straw.

"What's the matter, son?" Cunningham asked kindly, when they reached the street. "Still shaken up a bit?"

The younger man forced a smile as he looked down into Shorty's keen blue eyes. "Wouldn't you be, if you'd been in my place?" he countered.

"I guess I would, at that. You've had a tough time since you landed in this confounded country. I wouldn't blame you if you grabbed the next boat for home. However, things ought to go a little easier from now. It's not going to be any Sunday school picnic. Don't think that for a minute. But I don't imagine you'll come so close to a firing squad again very soon."

"I hope not," Atwell said feelingly.

Under ordinary circumstances, the trip up the river in Shorty's power boat would have been full of interest for Atwell. He had traveled but little during his life, and the unfolding of new vistas should have awakened an eager response. His thoughts, however, were far from the tall trees, the strange plants, the matted undergrowth that marched in slow

procession on either side of the boat. He failed to see the native canoes they passed, the 'squalid settlements, the vividly colored birds and butterflies, the many things that should have been of interest to a new-comer in tropical South America.

His thoughts were on Phyllis Montague and the pledge he had made her. As he reviewed it now, he wasn't quite sure that he hadn't been a bit impulsive. The gun-running affair was apparently settled; he had been granted a pardon by the president and that ended the matter so far as Atwell was concerned. His chances of proving his innocence now were remote in the extreme. In the first place, he had no knowledge of the country nor of the workings of that inner ring which, according to Shorty, was attempting to stage a revolution. And in the second place, he would undoubtedly be extremely busy at the camp.

Yes, he was forced to admit, he had been too hasty. It had been all right to entertain the thought of proving his innocence. That was well enough. But in voicing it, in telling Phyllis that he would virtually have nothing to do with her until it had been proved, he had gone farther than had been necessary.

Not until then, perhaps, did he realize the deep impression she had made upon him. Not until then did he realize how greatly it would test his will power to refrain from seeing her when they were separated by only fourteen miles.

Shorty, apparently not observing his partner's pre-occupation, or seeing it and attempting to shake him out of it, kept up a running fire of conversation which Atwell answered only in monosyllables. It was not until they were passing the palatial home of the *entendante* that Atwell gave heed to the other's words.

"It's quite a place," Shorty was saying, motioning toward the great white house which was built on the edge of the river, surrounded by extensive gardens. "It's a real palace when you get inside. You'll be invited down before long. The governor is always giving a ball or reception or something. Always asks me. He'll ask you too. We'll have to go, to keep up appearances, no matter how much we're fighting him on the outside."

Atwell laughed bitterly, remembering that Phyllis had mentioned those same functions; he visioned the agony of attending one of them and being unable to talk to her. Cunningham's eyes, however, were on the big white house; he either failed to recognize the note of bitterness in Atwell's laugh or deliberately ignored it.

"Oh, we'll be fighting him, son, and don't you forget it," Shorty grinned. "He'll try to block us, or I don't know my Andegoya."

"You mean he'll try to keep us from working our concession?" Atwell asked, his interest at last aroused.

"Absolutely. He's done it before and he'll do it again. Although you don't know it, there is supposed

to be no charge made by the government for a concession. The money we paid the governor for ours was a bribe."

"A bribe!" Atwell exclaimed.

"Well, not exactly. And yet it is, in a way, although you ordinarily think of a bribe as resulting in law-breaking or at least in some damage to the parties represented by the man who takes the bribe. In this case, it's a little different. The governor has the awarding of most of the concessions down here, mahogany and platinum and one thing another. He has the power to give them to anybody he thinks is capable of handling them. In reality, he gives them to the man who'll slip him the most money.

"See how it works? Whenever the government awards a concession, it sets a time limit on the working of it. The government gets ten per cent of our gross earnings and it's only fair that we shouldn't be allowed to take a concession and hold it indefinitely, without making any return to the government. That part of it is all right. But our friend Juartez's game is this. If he can hold up our work so that we can't make good within the time limit, we lose the concession and it reverts back to the state. That means he can peddle it again to the highest bidder. Get me? See how it works out?"

"Perfectly," Atwell nodded. "Apparently he killed two birds with one stone by having our machinery left on the dock in San Francisco and shipping his guns instead."

"Sure he did," Shorty agreed. "Only the second bird was only wounded and got away—the guns were intercepted. But he certainly succeeded in delaying our work. He set us back three or four weeks. And that means a lot when we've only got less than two months' leeway."

"Can we make it?" Atwell asked anxiously.

"We got to make it! That's all there is to it. It can be done, and with any kind of luck at all, we'll put it over. The crew you're bringing down will be on the next boat with the machinery. With your boys to boss the gang I got at camp now, we'll throw that dredge together like duck soup. Only—we got to watch out for our friend Juarte. He's likely to toss in a monkeywrench and gum up the works."

"And if he does," Atwell asserted shortly, "the state of Condota is apt to find itself without a governor. I've suffered enough at the hands of your *entendente*. A few more tricks like this last one and I'll get mad."

"I wouldn't blame you at all," Shorty grinned, light-hearted as ever. "And say, by the way, you haven't told me the low-down on this Señorita de Rico. What's her game, Bob?"

Atwell sighed deeply. Dolores de Rico had come to be something of a sore spot in his memory. "Shorty, I give you my word I don't know," he vowed.

"H-m, that's funny. I've known that lady for a long time and I know that she never does anything

without a mighty good reason behind it. She saved your life. Don't kid yourself that she didn't. Why?"

"I swear I haven't the least idea!"

"Did you talk to her afterward?"

"I had dinner with her."

"Did you ask her what her game was?" Shorty demanded bluntly.

Atwell laughed in spite of himself. "Well, not in so many words, Shorty. But I think I made it plain that I'd like to know."

"And she didn't give you a hint?"

"Not a hint."

"Well, it looks queer," Cunningham commented, with a wise shake of his head. "If you ask me, I'd say it's a cinch that you'll hear from Señorita Dolores before long. And I have a strong hunch that you won't be exactly pleased at what she'll tell you."

Atwell, however, did not hear the last remark of his voluble partner. His eyes, searching the river ahead eagerly, had caught sight of a familiar bulky form. His pulse quickened. A little thrill ran down his spine as he watched the dredger merge slowly into sight around a bend in the stream.

It was odd, he reflected, how those big, lumbering, barge-like boats with their towering superstructure always thrilled him. But they had, as far back as he could remember. And this dredger awakened a far greater response than the boats of Yuba county had ever done—for it was partly his and the pride of ownership welled in his breast.

What matter if it were only partially assembled? What matter if many long and toilsome days must pass before it would be operating? What matter if unknown dangers and myriad obstacles beset the path of their enterprise? Half of the dredger was his! And with it, come what might, he'd wrest a fortune from the stubborn gravel of the Condota River!

Shorty was still talking, giving little heed to the fact that his audience of one was engrossed in something besides his words.

"Well," Atwell interrupted, "you've gone further with the assembling than I'd expected."

Shorty's head jerked up. He stared up the river and spoke just one word: "Hell!"

"Why—what's the matter?" Atwell asked.

"The damned scoundrels have cut her adrift. Our concession is a mile further up the river. The boat's high and dry on a sand bar. And if you can tell me how we can get her off and float her up the stream without any power—well, I'll give you my share in her!"

CHAPTER XVIII

ALTHOUGH staggered by the potentialities of this blow to their fortunes, Atwell was instantly penitent.

"I'm sorry, Shorty," he said, crestfallen. "It's all my fault. If I had used my head a little more I would never have got into that trouble and you'd never have had to leave the boat so long."

"No, it's not your fault, son," Cunningham shook his head. "It's mine. I never should have left that man Anderson in charge. The Swede's all right. He's honest and all that. But the Lord blessed him with about the same amount of brains as an imbecile ape. I knew I was making a mistake when I left him in command. But I just didn't have anybody else I could trust. And now look what has happened!"

"Oh, well, it may not be as bad as it appears," Atwell answered philosophically. "We may be able to drag her off and work her up the stream."

"How? That's what I'd like to know," Shorty grunted morosely. "With her engines on the dock in San Francisco, or else in the hold of some boat on the high seas, how are we going to move her? We can't just stick a couple of *palancas* in the mud and shove her up the river."

"We can hire tugs, can't we?" Atwell suggested.

"Ten tugs would never pull her off. Why, she's almost high and dry! Must have come down on the

flood last night. The river always rises ten or twelve feet with a big storm."

"Can't we rig blocks and tackles on the shore?" Atwell persisted. "With a couple of tugs to do the hauling, and with tackles on shore, we might be able to work her up."

"Well, we might," Shorty admitted grudgingly, pulling viciously at his red mustaches. "But that Swede will think he's been through a sausage grinder when I get through with him!"

Atwell made no comment as the boat neared the dredger. It seemed to him that Anderson, whoever he might be, was far less to blame than the men who were responsible for cutting the dredger loose from her moorings. At last, when the boat was almost alongside, he asked:

"Who do you suppose did it, Shorty?"

"Juardez! Who else?" Cunningham snarled. "He's the only one that has any interest in putting us out of business. He knew the river would rise with that storm yesterday. So he sent men up to cut the boat loose, probably figuring that it would drift clear on down the river and we never would get it back. That's the way that baby works—in the dark."

"But is there nothing we can do?" Atwell asked. "No steps we can take to thwart them?"

"We might slip a knife in his back some night," the older man muttered. "That'd be the easiest way to settle things. And if he don't lay off us, by the Lord, I'll do it!"

As the launch neared the dredger, Atwell saw that the latter was wedged high on a sand bar, with a considerable list and only the up-stream side in the water. Judging from appearances, the boat had stranded when the water was at its height and had been left practically high and dry by the receding flood. The task of floating the heavy hull and towing it up the stream assumed enormous proportions, if indeed it could be done at all without waiting for another rise in the river.

Cunningham passed the sand bar, swung the launch around, slowed his engine and drifted alongside the dredger. Grasping the painter, he tossed it silently to a huge blond fellow who stood waiting on the deck of the boat. The launch was made fast. Atwell clambored onto the deck at the heels of his partner. Arms akimbo, his blue eyes flashing, Shorty faced the big man, whom Atwell realized was Anderson.

"Well, you addle-headed dolt of a Svenska farm hand!" he began belligerently. "What you got to say for yourself? For two cents Mex I'd knock that block head of yours into the river. Speak up now, you big dub! What you got to say?"

The big Swede, who towered head and shoulders above the bristling Shorty, took a step backward, seeming almost to cower before the wrath of his employer. Atwell could not restrain a smile. Anderson was no coward; he could see that at a glance. And yet the Swede cringed before Shorty as

though he expected a thorough beating and was ready to take it without a whimper.

"Ay ant got not'ing to say," Anderson managed to declare at last.

"Well, what happened?"

"Vell, last night, while Ay ban guarding the boat, somebody sneaks up in the dark and cracks me ofer the head. Wham! Like that." He bent down and pointed, not without a certain pride, to a prodigious lump on the crown of his head. "When I vake oop, vell, here we are!"

"What about the men who were supposed to be on watch with you?" Shorty demanded. "What happened to them?"

"Dem nigger faller?" The Swede shrugged. "Ay guess they're scared lak hal. They yump in river and svim to shore. Ay ant seen 'em all day."

"Huh! You might just as well have followed them."

"No, Ay ant yumping in this river," the Swede declared, with a grave shake of his straw-colored thatch of hair. "Ay ant like these alligator faller."

"Oh, you don't eh?" Shorty grunted sarcastically. "Well, one of these fine days I'm going to feed you to these alligator faller. See? I'm going to cut you up in little pieces and toss you to 'em. Get me?"

"Aw, Meester Cunningham!" Anderson grinned. "You ban yoking!"

"Joking, am I?" Shorty flared. "You just pull another Brodie like this and see whether I'm joking

or not. Now we're going up to camp. You stay here and look after this boat. If anything happens to it—well, you'll be alligator bait when I get through with you."

"Yes, sir," the Swede nodded submissively. "Only—today Ay ant had—not'ing to eat."

"No? Well, if I think about it when I get to camp I'll send a nigger down with something for you. If I don't, you'll go hungry."

"Yes, sir, Meester Cunningham."

Once in the launch and headed up stream again, Atwell observed that his partner was grinning. "What are you going to do with a big dolt like that?" Shorty asked at last. "I can't fire him. He's too good a workman. And loyal—say, that Swede would go through hell for me. Never saw anybody like him. Oh, well, guess we'll pull out of it all right. Only don't let me forget to send some grub down to him as soon as I get to camp. The poor devil must be half starved to death. Eats like a horse. Almost kills him to miss a meal."

The camp was located in a little clearing on the north side of the river, surrounded by a dense growth of forest that seemed almost impenetrable with its matted vines and undergrowth. It was a more pretentious establishment than Atwell had expected to find, particularly in view of the fact that the funds which went for its construction had been limited.

There was a bunkhouse and dining room for the white workmen, a machine shop, a company store,

a warehouse for supplies, and a small cottage which was to be used as office and living quarters by Shorty and Atwell. The white help at present consisted only of Anderson, a German storekeeper and a cook. All the work which had so far been done on the dredger had been done by natives, supervised by Anderson and Shorty.

"That was the cheapest way of putting her together," Cunningham explained to his partner. "We have to pay mighty high wages to white men down here, but the niggers work cheap. That's why I put off bringing your crew down till we were almost ready for them. The niggers are hard to handle and they're lazy. You have to drive 'em every minute. But they keep to themselves and they aren't much trouble. That's their camp across the river."

Cunningham pointed to another clearing on the other side of and a hundred yards further up the stream. Atwell made out a dozen or more squalid huts—they seemed little more to him—a few native women washing clothes at the river, a handful of men lolling about.

"I'll have to go over after a while and jump down their throats for deserting the boat last night," Shorty asserted as they mounted the steps of their cottage. "Not that it'll do any good, but they'll expect it and I don't want to disappoint 'em. Now come in and look your new home over."

Dusk was falling when the two partners sat down on the porch of their little cottage to enjoy a smoke

before turning in. They had had an excellent dinner. Under its warming influence their spirits had risen immeasurably. Nothing, they told each other, could come between them and the success of their enterprise. It would require a lot of hard work to see them over the hump, as Shorty expressed it, but they couldn't help but win out in the end, Juartez, the elements and the hard luck that seemed to pursue them notwithstanding.

"I'll go back to town in the morning and get a couple of tugs and some tackle," Shorty told his partner. "You can stay on the job and rig some 'deadmen' on the bank. Anderson will boss the niggers for you. You only have to tell him what you want done. He'll do the rest. Good man, the Swede. Never saw anybody that could pick two niggers up and knock their heads together any slicker than the Swede. He's a driver, that boy is. Short on brains, but long on brawn. Mighty good man."

Shorty paused and strained forward, listening. From down the river came the faintly audible put-put-put of a gas boat.

"Hello!" Cunningham grunted. "Somebody going up the river. Wonder who it is?"

They were not long in doubt. A white motor boat flashed around a bend in the stream and headed toward the landing at the camp. Shorty muttered something in his throat that sounded like a curse.

"Hackwood! Bound for his mahogany camp up the river," he said.

"Hackwood!" Atwell half rose from his chair.

His good nature of the evening was gone. He was conscious of only one thing: James Hackwood had been indirectly responsible for his arrest, his conviction, those days of indescribable misery when his life had hung on the thinnest of threads. Fists clenched, dark eyes gleaming angrily, Atwell watched the launch sweep up to the landing.

"Better take it easy, son," Shorty advised kindly. "We don't do things that way down here."

"What way?" Atwell asked angrily.

"With our fists. There are other ways, and better. Don't let the other fellow know that you're wise to his game—that's the rule down here. Keep him in the dark as long as possible. Then when you hit back you'll catch him with his guard down. It's the only way, son. Never show your hand till you have to. It's not wise, in Andegoya."

Atwell relaxed a bit, still not entirely convinced. There was nothing he would have enjoyed more at that particular moment than to feel his fist crashing into the sleek face of James Hackwood. The man had it coming, and then some. Nevertheless, Atwell fought down his anger. Shorty Cunningham had been in South America a long time; he knew whereof he spoke and Atwell had the fullest confidence in his advice. If Shorty told him to hide his hand, he'd have to do it.

"Is he coming here?" he asked the older man.

"He'll probably stop in for a few minutes," Shorty

answered calmly. "This is as far as he can go with his power boat. River is shallow from here on up. He has to transfer to native canoes—dugouts. There's one of 'em waiting for him. See it? Just above the landing?"

Atwell strained his eyes through the gloom and made out, very faintly, a long slender craft moving slowly toward the landing. Four natives, standing, propelled it with long poles.

Hackwood's launch had come to a stop by this time. Atwell saw a man in white disembark. The distance was too great to recognize faces, but he knew by the man's carriage and step that he was Hackwood.

"Easy now," Shorty cautioned in an undertone, as the mahogany operator started toward the cottage. "Don't forget, son. The glad hand and the old poker face! Play the game!"

CHAPTER XIX

SHORTY and Atwell rose as Hackwood mounted the steps. Even in the dusk the partners could see that their visitor was smiling, debonair, as casually friendly as ever.

"How are you, Atwell?" he nodded pleasantly. "Mighty glad to hear you got out of that trouble all right. Good evening, Cunningham. Just thought I'd drop in and say 'Hello' on my way up the river."

Atwell returned the other's greeting with an effort, glad that the faint light hid the red flush that he felt burning his cheeks.

"Make yourself at home, Hackwood," Cunningham invited cordially, drawing up a chair for the visitor. "How's everything with you?"

"Fine, so far as I can hear," the other answered easily, seating himself. "How is the platinum dredger business?"

"First rate," Shorty replied laconically.

"Was that your dredge I saw down the river?"

"That's her. Nice boat, isn't she?"

"Very," Hackwood agreed. "I was just wondering how she happened to be down the river so far. I thought your concession was up here."

Cunningham politely hid a yawn behind his broad hand. "She got away from the boys when the river rose last night. That's what comes of leaving an

incompetent man in charge while I was away. But it don't amount to much. We'll have her back here in a day or two. No trouble at all."

"Yes, of course. Things like that exasperate a man, though, don't they?"

"Well, it all depends on the man," Shorty answered with an easy shrug of his broad shoulders. "I been down here so long I'm used to 'em."

For an hour or more the three men sat talking on the porch. Darkness fell, wrapping them in an inky blanket. Then the eastern sky grew lighter; the mass of forest that surrounded the clearing came into being, silhouetted against the blue-gold heavens; the moon rose majestically above the trees.

The talk had been most commonplace; they had conversed as casually and to as little point as three old farmers discussing the weather. Yet beneath it all was an undercurrent of hostility, a hostility that was sensed rather than betrayed by voice or word. There was no further talk of the dredger. Nevertheless, the boat and the little game Juartez was playing were uppermost in the thoughts of Atwell and his partner—and, they did not doubt, in the thoughts of Hackwood as well.

The visitor rose at last and bade them good night. "The moon is up now and I might as well shove off. It is four hours of poling to my camp. If you ever get up that way, be sure to drop in to see me. *Buenas noches, mis amigos.*"

They watched him drift lazily down the path to the

landing and embark in his canoe. His orders to his boatmen came to them clearly above the silence of the forest. In a few minutes his white suit had disappeared into the blackness.

"Consummate scoundrel," Shorty pronounced, with more admiration than malice in his voice.

"I'd call him worse than that," Atwell said. "What do you suppose his game was, dropping in on us that way?"

"His game?" the other repeated sleepily. "Oh, just to keep up the pretense of friendliness—to sound us out and see how much we suspected. That's all."

"Well, I wish he'd stay away," the younger man burst out. "I don't like him and sooner or later I am going to tell him what I think of him. And it won't be in so many words, either. It'll be with two fists."

Shorty sighed and tossed his half-burned cigar to the ground. He made no comment on his partner's outburst. Instead, he said casually: "Let's turn in, Bob. We've got a tough day to-morrow."

Cunningham's prognostication proved to be correct. The partners were up at daybreak. Mustering their native crew and starting them down the river to the dredger, Shorty cranked the engine of the launch and headed down behind them. He followed close behind their canoes, worrying them, as it were, urging them to greater speed.

"Only way to handle 'em," he told his partner. "Treat 'em like white folks an' they'll walk all over you. Treat 'em rough and they'll like you—as much

as any of these niggers likes an American. All in all, they're a hard lot. They're tricky, dishonest, lazy. The old iron hand stuff is the only thing for them boys."

They found Anderson, hungry and forlorn after his solitary vigil of more than twenty-four hours, eagerly awaiting their arrival. "Swede, this is my partner, Bob Atwell," Shorty told him. "His word is law. Now get that grub we brought down under your belt and turn to."

"Yes, sir, Meester Cunningham."

Shorty had hardly turned the nose of his craft down the river when the work of setting out the "deadmen" began. The Swede, as Cunningham had said, proved to be a veritable slave driver. He showed no mercy toward the natives, driving them until the sweat poured from their scantily clothed bodies in rivulets. But Anderson was more than a slave driver; he was a worker himself. He did not stand off and give orders; he plunged into the task furiously, doing as much real work as any three of the natives.

Atwell, not to be outdone, took his place beside the Swede and fought doggedly to keep up with him. It was grueling work, this grubbing brush and digging holes and burying the anchors on which the dredger was to be hauled up the river. Although he suspected that the temperature was under ninety, the heat, due to the high humidity of the atmosphere, seemed terrific. A dozen times during the morning Anderson

turned to his young employer with a slow shake of his head.

"Ay tank you better rest for while, Meester Atwell. This heat ban hard on faller that ant used to her."

"Oh, I'm all right," was Atwell's invariable response. "I'm used to hard work."

However, when a glance at his watch showed him that it was noon, he felt like dropping into the dank grass and staying there. But instead he stood back from the work, surveyed the four "deadmen" that had been planted during the morning, and nodded approvingly.

"We're making better progress than I expected," he told Anderson. "Two more 'deadmen' and we'll be ready for Shorty and his tugs. Once we get her off that sand bar, it will be clear sailing. The tugs can tow her right up to the camp."

"Yas, Ay tank so too," Anderson nodded sagely, and cast an inquiring eye toward the dredger, where their lunch had been left.

At one o'clock Shorty's launch appeared around the turn, closely followed by two tugs. He landed on the dredger, took in the situation at a glance and grinned broadly.

"Swede, you've done noble," he commended. "Only don't work them niggers to death. We may need 'em later."

Anderson shook his thatch of straw-colored hair. "Ay don't tank hard work ban killing anybody,

Meester Cunningham," he declared very earnestly.

Half an hour later the task of getting the dredger off the bar was begun. Tackles were run from the boat to the "deadmen," the lines were bent on the tugs. Shorty gave the signal. Black water, churned by the powerful propellers of the tugs, became white foam. Blocks creaked shrilly. Ropes snapped taut with a singing hiss.

Atwell, watching from the stern of the dredger, felt the huge craft shudder. He held his breath. If their plan failed—if the tugs were not powerful enough to move their huge burden—

Then he felt the hull give, an inch, two inches, a foot.

"She's under way!" he shouted wildly to Shorty, who was on the bank.

"Darn right she is!" Shorty called back elatedly to Atwell. Then, to the captains of the tugs: "Give her the gun, boys! Keep her movin'! What you got there? A couple of tin teakettles? Come on! Let's see you move!"

The tugmasters were willing but the task was slow. Nevertheless, the dredger crept toward the deeper water inch by inch. Once they were compelled to stop and shift their blocks to "deadmen" further up the river. Once a hawser parted and caused delay while it was being replaced. But by three o'clock the task of floating the big craft was completed. They made her fast, while the tugs shifted their lines. Then they started on up the river. Another hour

saw the dredger securely anchored in the center of the stream opposite the camp.

After a long argument with the native tugmasters over payment—it was Shorty's policy to haggle with all native workmen—a settlement was made and the tugs chugged off down the river. Cunningham's face was beaming as he mounted the steps of the porch, where Atwell was sprawled wearily, completely worn out by the hard day.

"They wanted a hundred dollars apiece, and I worked 'em down to forty," he grinned pridefully. "Not bad, eh, Bob?"

"You did very well, Shorty," the other smiled. "We got out of that hole mighty easy, all considered."

"You bet we did," Cunningham agreed fervently. "Eighty dollars was cheap. Of course, those blocks and tackles ran pretty high. But that's all right. We'll use 'em later. No harm in having them on hand."

Atwell stared up at his partner and a slow smile overspread his face. "By the way, Shorty, when are you going to give me a deed to your share of the boat?"

The older man blinked. "Huh? Which?"

"Didn't you tell me yesterday afternoon that you'd give me your share of the boat if I found a way to get her off?" Atwell asked seriously.

"Huh? By gosh, guess you're right!" He stared at his recumbent partner for a moment, while he thoughtfully scratched his head. "Do you want me

to—" He broke off, catching the 'twinkle in Atwell's eyes. "Aw, you go to the dickens!" he grunted, and strode into the cottage bellowing for the cook.

Atwell, despite his weariness, felt a warm glow of contentment creeping over him. The more he saw of Shorty Cunningham, the better he liked his partner—after all, he'd go a long way before he'd find another man with Shorty's capabilities and his unbounded zeal. Never morose nor downcast nor discouraged, the little dredger man plunged into each task with all the ardor of an enthusiast. It made little difference what the task might be—berating Anderson for his dereliction or settling with the tug-masters—he approached it with the same earnest intensity of purpose, the same unbridled enthusiasm. One partner in a million was Shorty Cunningham.

Eager for the days of hard work that were to come, more than for the reward they might bring, Atwell relaxed gratefully and gave himself over to his dreams. They were pleasant dreams, full of the pride of achievement—until a shadow crossed them, the slender wistful face of Phyllis Montague. And then another shadow came, a greater shadow because of the mystery attached to it, the smiling, provocative countenance of Dolores de Rico.

The day was darkening. Sighing, Atwell got to his feet. Enough of day dreaming!

There was a weary slant to his shoulders as he followed Shorty into the cottage.

CHAPTER XX

THE three weeks that followed passed quickly enough for Bob Atwell. Despite the fact that the failure of their machinery to arrive on the *Mazatlan* had seriously delayed the work, there was plenty to be done on the dredger. The two partners and Anderson, who was an expert dredge man, worked from dawn until dark and often far into the night.

The big boat had by this time taken shape. The superstructure had been completed. The forward and stern gantries, the frameworks which supported the digging ladder and the stacker, respectively, were in place. The clean-up tables and riffle boxes were installed. All that remained to be done was the shipping of the bucket line and the stacker belt, and the installing of the winches. And this task, perforce, must wait until the component parts arrived from San Francisco.

"Well, the ship with our crew and machinery is due to arrive to-morrow," Shorty said one day, after returning from a hurried trip to town. "The real job is about to begin—hauling that stuff up the river on lighters and installing it on the boat. And we've got less than four weeks to do it in."

"Can it be done?" Atwell asked, well knowing the answer that would come.

"Can it! Say! You just watch our smoke!"

Shorty returned enthusiastically. "If that crew of yours is half as good as you say it is, there won't be anything to it."

Atwell knew differently. He had had enough experience with dredgers to know that it would be no easy task to complete the assembling of the boat in five weeks. It would mean twelve or fourteen hours of work a day for all hands and the cook. Whether his crew, unacclimated as it was, could stand the pace was a question. But far be it from Atwell to cast a damper on his partner's enthusiasm.

"You'll find the crew as willing a gang of workmen and as fine a group of men as you ever worked with," he told Shorty. "They're tough and they're hard and if you cross them they're mean. But treat them right, give them plenty of good grub and plenty of hard labor, and they'll work their heads off for you."

"And that's the kind of men we need down here," Cunningham nodded knowingly. "The tougher they are, the better I like 'em. I'll take the launch down early in the morning and bring some of them up to camp. And you can be darned sure I'll leave half a dozen of 'em to guard the machinery. The time is too short to take any chances with it, particularly when the whole world knows what boat it's on."

"Do you think Juarteiz will try anything?" Atwell asked.

His partner shrugged. "You can't tell. These natives are pretty hard to figure out. Chances are,

he won't lift a hand to hinder us—that's because he knows we'll be expecting him to do something. But just let us relax for a minute, just let us go to sleep at the switch, and he'll hit us so hard we won't know what's struck us until after the funeral's all over."

Atwell nodded thoughtfully and went back to his work. As the days had dragged by, and particularly after such conversations with Shorty, the younger partner's enthusiasm had lagged. The task of assembling the dredger would be a prodigious one. Rushed through without interruption, with good luck attending every step of the way, they might be able to finish it in time to stave off the loss of the concession. But the slightest delay or the slightest miscalculation of their plans would result in certain disaster.

Thoughts of Phyllis Montague troubled him too. The longing to see her had grown with every passing day until it had become almost overpowering. And as this longing had grown, in like measure had his hopes of proving his innocence diminished. Only Juarte and Hackwood held the key that would solve the problem. And what chance had he of making them talk? In those days, while he had worked with Shorty and Anderson on the dredger, he had formed a hundred plans to bring the matter to a head and force the governor and Hackwood to declare his innocence. And each plan was discarded almost as quickly as it was formed. Indeed, there were times when he saw himself in an impenetrable forest,

hemmed in on every side by lies' he was unable to blast.

If only some one would come forward and tell the truth! But who was there with the courage to announce himself guilty of a capital crime for the sole purpose of establishing the innocence of an American? Certainly not Hackwood! Certainly not the *entendante*! Who else was there?

Dolores de Rico? The señorita had been much in Atwell's thoughts. She might know something, he told himself many times. He was almost certain that she had been in some way involved in the affair. Were not Hackwood and Juarteiz her trusted friends? Atwell had seen enough that first night in Condota to know that there was much between these three, much more, indeed, than met the casual eye.

Might she not be induced to come forth and tell what she knew? Atwell smiled to himself each time he asked the question. He had some pride left. His debt to her was large enough now; indeed, it could not be larger. He could hardly go to her for more favors, particularly when the matter involved the safety of her friends. No, if Dolores de Rico came to him and offered to clear him of the charge, well and good. He certainly could not go to her.

Atwell's hands were bound and it was the feeling of futility that made his self-imposed martyrdom, if such it could be called, all the more unbearable. If he could fight, it would be different. If he could hold out hope for an ultimate clearing up of the

matter, it would not be so bad. But the future, insofar as gaining the friendship of Phyllis Montague was concerned, loomed dark before him.

Had he, by some strange caprice of fate, fallen in love with Phyllis? Many times he asked the question. And each time he told himself that his feeling for her was not love. He wanted her friendship, not only because he would value it as a friendship, but because it would mean her respect, her admiration, her esteem. For after all, he reflected bitterly many times, no man who fails to win the respect of such a woman as Phyllis Montague can hold himself in any great respect.

The arrival of the crew and the beginning of the final lap in the assembling of the dredger served to buoy his spirits somewhat. All of the men were old friends, all were crammed full of enthusiasm, and all were spoiling for a fight. It seemed good to see them again, to hear their good-natured badinage, to know that they were ready and willing to back him up in anything. Then, too, with the resumption of intensive work on the dredger so many problems came up, and so swiftly, that he had little time for brooding.

The work progressed rapidly. The bucket line, the winches and the other parts of the equipment were towed up the river on lighters, hoisted aboard the dredger and installed. The crew, never indolent nor disinterested in a job, caught some of Cunningham's endless store of enthusiasm and outdid them-

selves. They worked from daylight until dusk, which at that season of the year amounted to some fifteen hours, and under their eager hands the dredger rapidly neared completion.

A week before the time limit on their concession expired, Shorty and Atwell knocked off work one night in a drizzling rain that bid fair to turn into a real storm. It was the rainy season, if any season in that section of tropical South America could be called more rainy than any other, and Atwell had already learned what to expect—not a few tenths of an inch, as rain was measured in the States, but more likely a few inches.

“Hadn’t we better get out some extra lines before the river rises?” he asked his partner.

Cunningham nodded, grinning. “You’re learning your stuff fast, Bob. I’ve already ordered the Swede to get ’em out. We’re not taking any chances of losing the boat, now that she’s almost completed. And from the way this wind is blowing, I’d say we were in for a hummer of a storm. The river may rise fourteen or sixteen feet in a few hours. That means an increase in current from maybe half a mile an hour to four or five.”

The storm lived up to Cunningham’s predictions. By nine o’clock the rain was coming down in torrents. As he watched it from the window of their cottage, it seemed to Atwell as though it were falling in a solid sheet. He was still unaccustomed to rain like

that, though it had stormed on an average of twice a week since his arrival in Andegoya.

It made him nervous, filled him with a vague feeling of uneasiness. Anything could happen on a night like that.

CHAPTER XXI

SHORTY came in after a time, his oilskins glistening, his bright red face beaded with moisture. He saluted gravely. "All secure on deck, sir. Extra lines are cut and the ship is riding high."

Atwell, however, failed to fall in with his partner's facetious mood. "Is the river up, Shorty?" he asked, angry with himself for the anxiety he knew his voice betrayed.

"She's up about six feet already and rising fast. But there's nothing to worry about. We've got plenty of lines out and plenty of men on watch. What do you say we turn in?"

"No, I think I'll stay up a while longer."

"Nervous?"

"Well, a little," the younger man admitted ruefully.

"Don't blame you. We've been under a heavy strain the last few weeks. I'll certainly be glad when it's over, win, lose or draw. Good night, son."

"Good night, Shorty."

Atwell walked away from the window, sat down in a chair and picked up a month-old newspaper. French Win Victory Over Riffians; Senate to Reconsider Higher Tax Brackets; Ax Murderer Repudiates Confession; Malay Typhoon Sinks Four Vessels. Thus ran the news of the world. There

had been a time, not so many months back, when Atwell would have read it all avidly. Now these events seemed as remote and unimportant as though they had occurred on another planet.

Strange, he reflected, how a little matter of two thousand miles could change a man's point of view! No, it wasn't the distance. He himself had changed—something had been born within him or something had died. He didn't know exactly which. The world at large had ceased to interest him. His view of life had narrowed until it embraced little more than the dredger anchored out in the stream—the dredger and Phyllis.

He tossed the newspaper aside and sat listening to the rain beating on the corrugated iron roof of the cottage. The noise it made was loud, and yet it was oddly restful—a deep-voiced moan, a monotonous, lulling overtone.

He must have dozed, for he opened his eyes after a time to see that the kerosene lamp had burned down until only a faint blue flame flashed about the wick. He thought for a moment of refilling it. Then, striking a match and glancing at his watch, he saw that it was twelve o'clock, high time he was in bed. Blowing out the light he started toward his room. As he fumbled for the doorknob in the darkness, he became conscious of a new sound that had risen above the moan of the rain. It was deeper, more portentous. The wind? No, it was too steady for the wind. Then it dawned on him—the river, of course.

The realization frightened him a little. It was the first time he had heard that ominous roar. The stream must be up sixteen or eighteen feet, he reflected, possibly more—the highest rise since his arrival at the camp had been twelve feet. He debated an instant, wondering if it might not be wise to call Shorty. Still, his partner knew the river, knew what to expect of it in a storm like this. The boat was safe, or Shorty never would be asleep.

The thought gave him little assurance, however. Making up his mind at last, he fumbled on a shelf and found a flashlight, slipped into his oilskins and boots and made his way out into the storm. His heart skipped a beat as he stared out across the river. There were no lights where the dredger should have been! She had broken away from her moorings! Or, more likely, Juartez's men had eluded the watch and cut the lines!

Atwell dashed wildly toward the river, splashing through water that reached halfway to his knees. Then he stopped, laughing with relief. A faint light loomed out of the darkness.

"I might have known I couldn't see the lights two hundred yards through this rain," he grinned, slowing to a walk. "The boat's all right. She's probably riding pretty. Still," he mused, "it won't do any harm to go out and look her over. Might as well play safe."

The landing was awash and he reached it with some difficulty. After a short search he found the painter

of one of the scows, the rectangular, flat-bottomed boats that were used to go and come between the shore and the dredger. Shipping the oars in the rowlocks, he shoved off into the black, swollen stream and headed toward the dredger, whose lights were clearly visible now. A few feet from shore the current picked the scow up like a chip and whirled it downstream. Atwell bent to the oars. Although he had expected something of the sort, the increased power of the current staggered him. It was almost unbelievable that the slow, sluggish Condota could turn into this raging torrent in so short a time.

When Atwell finally made the dredger and grasped a line that hung over the side, he was thoroughly winded. He paused a moment to catch his breath before climbing aboard.

"Hey, you!" A deep voice suddenly roared above the storm. "Get away from that boat or, by yimminy, Ay skol blow yore head off!"

Atwell stood up in the scow, smiling. "It's I, Anderson!" he called. "It's Atwell!"

"Oh!" The Swede's huge form appeared from the lee of the winchroom. "Ay ban sorry, Meester Atwell." He bent down, caught Atwell's hand and swung him up on to the deck.

"There's nothing to be sorry about, Swede. I'm glad to see you're on the job."

"Ay ant takin' no more chances," Anderson grinned. He rubbed his head, which was bared to

the rain. "That bump he ban still there yet. Ay ban staying on yob purty close now."

"Good! Now tell me how the boat is riding. Any leaks developed?"

"No. She ban dry lak hal inside."

"And the lines?"

The Swede shook his head. "The lines ant ban so gude. Purty heavy strain on dem lines. You see, Meester Atwell, we ban in center of stream, where the current ban running more stronger. Last half hour Ay ban tanking maybe it's better should ve pull over to one side liddle bit. Current ant ban so strong over there."

Atwell nodded. "It wouldn't be a bad idea at that, Anderson. In the morning, or as soon as the water goes down, we could pull back in the center again, where we won't be in danger of grounding. It's lucky we got that port winch connected up to-day. We'd be helpless without it. Now you round up a couple of the boys and get steamed up. You should have called me before, Swede. It will be a half hour before we can get enough pressure to pull her over."

Anderson's chest swelled pridefully. "Steam ban up, sir. An hour ago Ay ban tanking it's best to fire up, case of emergency. Ve ban ready to move, Meester Atwell."

"That's fine," Atwell praised, reflecting that the Swede's previous blunder had evidently done him good. "I'll run up forward and see that the lines are all clear. We'll pull over to port, toward the north

bank. Have a man at the starboard winch to pay out the lines. And don't start up until I give the word."

"Aye, aye, Meester Atwell." The Swede dashed off along the deck, his oilskins merging into the darkness.

Atwell moved forward cautiously, envying Anderson a bit for his surefootedness on the slippery deck. The man must have been born and raised on a dredger!

Atwell reached the digging well—the indentation in the square bow through which the bucket line ran—and peered out into the storm. The rain, apparently, was abating somewhat. The bright lights on the superstructure penetrated for a hundred yards or more. He could make out the buildings of the camp, the native hovels across the river, the black wall of the forest beyond. The lines appeared to be clear. No, one of them was dragging slightly where it touched the water; a piece of drift wood had caught on it, most likely.

Atwell was about to turn back and order the men to clear the line, when something out of the ordinary caught his eye. In the faintly luminous sky that followed the breaking of the rain clouds a black, low-lying, unrecognizable object was drifting down the river. The young man thought at first that his eyes must be deceiving him—a huge turtle, thirty or forty feet across, seemed to be floating toward him.

Then, with a sudden cry, he recognized the drifting object. It was a raft of mahogany logs, hundreds

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of them, lashed tightly together and weighing heaven knew how many tons—drifting down from Hackwood's camp. With the force of a battering ram it swept toward the dredger.

Visions swam like a cinema before Atwell's eyes—the dredger torn from her moorings, her hull stove in, her crew swimming for their lives in the torrent; himself pitched into the black swirling water; chaos, tragedy, death; and behind it all, debonair, calm, ever at ease, the smiling face of James Hackwood.

CHAPTER XXII

ATWELL's first impulse, on seeing the heavy raft of logs sweeping down on the dredger, was to dive over the side and swim for shore. It seemed certain that the boat would be sunk; nothing could save her. The raft, too, would probably break to pieces under the impact. To be forced to take to the river with those great logs bobbing on every side would be sure death. No man could live in that tumultuous stream under such conditions.

Atwell swung around and cupped his hands, intending to warn the crew and then strike out for shore. Instead he heard himself shouting:

"Haul away, Swede! For God's sake haul away!"

That was all. The purr of the winch was his only answer. Atwell glanced around anxiously, feeling as though that shout to Anderson had tossed away half a dozen lives, his own included. The raft was bearing down swiftly, whereas the dredger was moving toward the north bank by inches.

It was utter folly, he told himself bitterly. Never in the world could the boat be gotten out of the way of those hurtling tons of mahogany. They would all be killed, crushed to death between the huge logs.

However, the dredger was moving, ever so slowly, but still it was moving. Faster, faster, faster, At-

well pleaded! If only they could get it out of the center of the stream, the raft might graze by them. And yet he knew that it was impossible.

Then, with startling suddenness, a faint hope dawned. He leaped aft, forgetting the slippery decks, racing wildly toward the point where the starboard lines crossed the deck. In a rack on the side of the winchroom was an ax, kept there for emergencies. Atwell grasped it fiercely, swung it over his head, brought it down sharply over one of the lines that stretched up the river to the south bank. Three times the ax flashed in the air. The last line parted under the strain.

With the starboard hawsers severed, the dredger started to drift to port, borne down by the swift current. Atwell peered over his shoulder. Had he acted in time? The raft was close aboard now. Not ten feet separated it from the bow of the big boat. But the latter was gathering momentum, swinging fast.

A long moment, during which Atwell scarcely breathed. Then the raft was amidships, passing so close that it scraped the dredger's hull.

Atwell chuckled, half hysterically, and turned toward the winchroom. Anderson's burly form was just issuing from the doorway.

"Meester Atwell!" he bellowed. "The starboard lines! They ban carried away!"

"Yes, they've carried away, Swede," Atwell responded, "with the aid of an ax."

“But Ay—”

Atwell pointed down the stream. The big raft was just merging into the distance. A low roar that might have been a curse issued from Anderson’s lips. The man was thinking fast enough now, Atwell told himself; even the thick-headed Swede could sense the death and destruction that must have followed if the raft had struck the dredger.

Then it dawned upon Atwell that the boat was not yet safe. The cutting of the starboard lines had doubled the strain on the port lines. The winches, which were still hauling away on the remaining hawsers, were increasing the strain.

“Swede!” he snapped. “Shut off those winches! Hurry!”

Judging by the alacrity with which he dove into the winchroom, Anderson, too, saw the added danger. The pulsing of the winches stopped almost instantly. The dredger still swung to port, however; Atwell knew she would continue to swing until she crashed into the bank. The port hawsers were stretched out ahead to their “deadmen” on the bank as straight as the course of rifle bullets. The strain on them was terrific. It would be a miracle if they failed to part.

Anderson was back on deck again, staring at the lines and shaking his head dubiously. Three other members of the crew, realizing that the starboard lines had carried away but not yet knowing why, raced out of the winchroom. They were brave men, these

hardened dredge workers; yet their faces blanched when they saw the taut lines.

"They'll never hold!" some one exclaimed.

"They've got to!" Atwell came back tersely.

He knew that the greatest strain would come when the dredger swung against the bank. If the hawsers survived that test, the boat would be safe for the time being. He held his breath, braced his feet against the shock that must come.

Suddenly the dredger grounded, lightly at first, then with a shuddering crash that set the hawsers to singing. The hull and superstructure creaked awesomely. The deck listed to starboard until it seemed that the men would slide off into the water. Grasping the forward gantry for support, Atwell waited for the sharp reports that would mean the parting of the lines.

But they did not come. The boat settled slightly to a more even keel, ceased to tremble, came to rest in the comparatively calm water at the side of the river.

"By yimminy, that ban close call!" the Swede grunted, wiping the perspiration from his forehead.

"I never saw a closer one," Atwell grinned, feeling suddenly weak.

Hurrying around to the port side, he glanced hastily at the hawsers, saw that they were now in no danger of carrying away, and turned to his men.

"We'll have to get our starboard lines out again, boys. We can't leave the boat where she is. When

the river goes down, she'll be high and dry. Morgan, you wake up the rest of the crew and get them on the job. All but Cunningham. Let him sleep. And make it snappy, Morgan. The storm seems to be over and the river will go down fast. It will take us the rest of the night to get those lines out. It will be a mighty tough job, with the current running the way it is, but we'll have to do it. So let's pitch in."

The men responded with a will. Hour after hour they worked, in an unpleasant, drizzling rain. Additional lines were run out from the boat, a difficult and dangerous task in the swift current. The free ends of the severed hawsers were recovered and made fast to them. The winches were started up and the dredger was hauled slowly back to her former moorings.

Dawn was breaking by the time the task was finished. The rain was over. The clouds had magically disappeared, swept away in the teeth of a fresh south wind. The sky was flaming red as Atwell wearily mounted the steps of the cottage.

He paused, his hand on the doorknob, and gazed out across the black river, the glistening forest, the rose-hued sky. "What a night!" he reflected grimly. "I wonder if Hackwood deliberately set that raft adrift."

Pushing open the door of Shorty's room, he found his partner in the act of tying his shoes. The older man did not glance up at once.

"Up early, aren't you, Bob? How do things look?"

"They look fine—now!" Atwell sighed, in spite of himself; he was so weary that he could willingly have lain down and gone to sleep on the floor.

Cunningham glanced up quickly, his eyes narrowing as he scanned his partner. "Say, what the dickens! You been up all night, Bob!"

The younger man nodded, forcing a smile. "Yes, we had quite a party during the night. In fact, it was one of the most exciting parties I have ever been on, excepting only the night I wandered around in the chicken yards of Condota."

Shorty leaped suddenly to the window, assured himself that the dredger was still anchored in the stream and then turned to his partner.

"What happened?" he demanded.

As briefly as possible Atwell narrated the events of the night. When he concluded, Shorty stamped his foot and cursed angrily.

"A fine partner you are!" he growled. "All that going on, and you let me sleep through it! That's a deuce of a way to treat a fellow!"

"But, Shorty, the excitement was all over in about two minutes," Atwell reminded him. "After that it was just hard work. We had all the men we needed and I thought you might just as well get your sleep."

"Well, guess that's right," the older man admitted grudgingly. "But it seems to me when it comes to excitement, you have all the luck around here."

"Never mind, Shorty," Atwell laughed. "From the way things are going, your turn will probably come before long. I'm going up the river this afternoon."

Cunningham started. "Going to Hackwood, you mean?" he asked quietly.

"Yes."

"H-m." Shorty took a turn up and down the floor, pulling viciously at his flowing red mustaches. "Of course," he said at last, dropping onto the edge of the bed. "Hackwood turned that raft loose on purpose. There's a possibility that it broke away in the storm. But knowing the friendly little game these boys play around here, I'm pretty darned certain it was deliberate. Hackwood knows this river. He's logged on it for years and he knows how it rises with a storm. If he'd wanted to keep that raft at his camp, he'd have seen to it that there was plenty of lines on it.

"He sends a raft down every week or so. You've seen 'em go past." Atwell nodded. "He always sends 'em down when the river is fairly low, so that his crews can handle 'em. He'd never send one down in a storm, because it would be too apt to hit a bend in the river or a sand bar and break up. That would mean a lot of work gathering up the logs in the harbor and probably a run-in with the harbor authorities if any shipping ran afoul of the logs.

"So there you are." Shorty waved his big hands in a futile gesture. "All the circumstantial evidence

in the world that it was deliberate. And yet not an iota of proof. What can you say to him in a case like that? You know I told you it's best never to show your hand down here, to keep in the dark as long as possible."

"You ask what I am going to say to him?" Atwell came back. "I am going to tell him this: From now on we are going to keep a man in a canoe about a mile above camp. Some one is going to be on watch there night and day. In the canoe there is going to be fifty pounds of dynamite, with a fuse and primer set. If Hackwood sends a raft down this river without giving us due warning, he'll have it blown to pieces."

Cunningham pursed his lips thoughtfully; then his good-natured face burst into a smile and he thumped his partner over the shoulders. "Bob, there are times when I do believe you have a head on your shoulders. And this is one of them. That's a mighty sweet plan you've worked out. I'll send to town to-day for the dynamite."

It was Atwell's turn to smile. "Don't bother," he said. "A bluff will work just as well as the real thing. We'll keep the canoe there, all right, and the man. But I don't think the dynamite will be necessary."

"Whew!" Shorty exclaimed. "You're getting better and better all the time, Bob."

"On the contrary, I'm getting sleepier and sleepier all the time. And I am going to turn in right now."

Atwell lay down in his clothes and slept until noon.

He awoke refreshed, changed into a suit of white linen which Shorty had brought back from town for him a few weeks before, and had lunch.

"Remember," Cunningham cautioned, as Atwell was about to shove off in a native canoe for the journey up the river, "diplomacy pays best in the long run. If you let this bird know we're onto the game he's playing for Juarte, we can look for more drastic measures from him. As long as we play the sucker, he'll treat us as such. But once let him get wise to us, and it'll probably be curtains."

Atwell nodded reassuringly. "I know, Shorty. You've been drilling that into me for weeks. The old glad hand stuff. It is going to be rather hard to put this thing over in a friendly way. However, I think it can be done. I'll do my best, anyway. So long! See you sometime to-night."

Atwell gave the word to his boatmen; they leaned on their *palances*; the slender craft glided gracefully out into the stream. As yet he had formed no definite plan of action. He knew that there were other mahogany camps further up the stream, above Hackwood's. He might casually put the blame for last night's occurrence on another operator, he reflected. He imagined a conversation: "We can't allow our boat to be endangered by these reckless operators, Hackwood. If another raft comes down without warning, we're going to dynamite it. I know you'd always warn us. But I just thought I'd tell

you so you could pass the word along. You can't blame us, can you?"

Yes, he told himself, that ought to put the idea over very well. It was diplomatic and did not reveal their hand. Shorty, he was sure, would approve of it. Well pleased with himself, Atwell sat back in the canoe and dozed. The scenery repeated itself endlessly—the high-banked river, the tangled mass of jungle that extended to the water's edge and even over it, the strangely thorned trees, the tall palms, the matted undergrowth.

Four hours after leaving the camp, the canoe rounded a bend in the river and came upon a pretentious settlement. Atwell could not but admire the neat rows of cottages, the gardens at the rear of each one, the larger, more ornate home that he knew must be Hackwood's. The boatmen swung the canoe in to the landing; the bow man leaped out with the painter and made it fast.

Atwell climbed out, mounted the short flight of steps to the dock and started up a graveled path toward the largest of the houses. There were many women and children about, a few men; they watched him curiously as he walked up to the house and mounted the steps. A wide porch, fully screened, extended around three sides of the building. As Atwell paused at the door, he did not at once see the occupants of the porch.

A native, who had been standing nearby, obsequiously threw the screen door wide. Atwell stepped

onto the porch and immediately felt an inclination to turn around and flee back to his boat. Seated with their backs to him, apparently engaged in earnest conversation, were Phyllis Montague and Dolores de Rico.

CHAPTER XXIII

ATWELL would hardly have been more surprised if he had seen the Prince of Wales in conversation with "Swede" Anderson. Only one thing had these two women in common—both were unusually comely. Beyond that feature, they were as unlike as two persons could possibly be. One was light of hair and blue of eye, gentle of manner, earnest, sincere, retiring. The other was dark; her personality was commanding and aggressive; and, Atwell suspected, she was none too sincere. . . . And yet there they were, Phyllis and Dolores, talking together, apparently most friendly.

Señorita de Rico was the first to turn at the sound of Atwell's light footfall. Her face brightened when she saw him. She rose swiftly and came toward him, her slender hand outstretched, her lips smiling a welcome.

"Señor Atwell! I am so glad to see you. This is such a pleasure. Are you acquainted with Miss Montague? But of course you are. How foolish of me. Come! We are just about to have tea. You must join us."

There was nothing in the world that Atwell would have liked less to do than have tea with Señorita de Rico and Phyllis Montague. The sweetness of Dolores cloyed; he had pledged himself not to seek

the company of Phyllis. And yet, in the face of the former's insistence, he did not see how he could refuse. He said "Good afternoon" to Phyllis and was surprised when she answered his greeting by a further invitation to have tea with them.

"I came up to see Mr. Hackwood," he said rather lamely, and knew that his face was growing red.

"Mr. Hackwood is out with one of his crews," Señorita de Rico told him pleasantly. "He won't be back for an hour or more. So you might as well reconcile yourself to our company."

"That is rather unkind," Atwell smiled, his self-possession returning. "I am sure it will be a pleasure."

After he had taken a chair, he ventured a question. "When did you come up the river? I didn't see you pass our camp."

"We came up this morning," Phyllis told him. Her blue eyes never left his face as she spoke; she seemed to be searching him, weighing him. "We saw a number of men on your dredger, but I guess you must have been inside when we passed."

"I was inside—asleep!" Atwell smiled. He addressed the remark, however, more to Dolores than to her companion—he was still determined to keep his pledge. "We had a hard time with the boat last night. The storm, you know. I was up until daylight, so I slept until noon."

"That's why we didn't see you then." Señorita de Rico favored him with her most winsome smile;

her eyes seemed to say that her failure to see him had been a great disappointment. "Ordinarily I would have stopped when I changed boats. But I was in a hurry this morning. One of my rafts broke loose last night and I was anxious to find out what the trouble was."

"One of *your* rafts!" Atwell's surprise was patent.

"Of course. This is my camp, you know. Mr. Hackwood manages it for me, along with several of his own. Mine, however, is the only one we are operating until the rainy season is over."

Atwell nodded, striving to accept the information in a matter-of-fact manner. He was disconcerted—though he hoped he did not show it too plainly—by what he learned, for it set his plans awry. He could hardly tell this young woman that he would dynamite her rafts if another were sent down without warning. Neither could he blame the near tragedy of the night before on another operator. He'd have to think up some other plan. And thinking, at that moment, was very hard.

"Miss Montague came up with me to look over our camp," Dolores volunteered. "She had never seen one. She is going to stop at your dredger on the way back, if you don't mind. She'd like to see that too."

Somewhat surprised, and wondering vaguely if the suggestion had really come from Phyllis, he said: "I shall be very pleased to have you, Miss Montague. We are not operating yet, but the boat is almost com-

pleted and I'll be glad to take you over it." Then, because his eyes were on her, because he felt that he must say something and could think of nothing else, he asked: "How is your father?"

"He is very well, thank you." The answer came pleasantly enough. Or was her cordiality really forced? He didn't know. "He is looking forward to another visit from you," the girl went on. "He just received a long letter from one of the assistant football coaches at California, an old friend. And, of course, he is dying to talk football."

Atwell smiled faintly and looked away. He shook his head slowly. "I am afraid it will be a long time before I can come down to town." He tried to speak casually, but he knew that he failed. She must have sensed the pain that statement had caused him. Oh, well, at least she knew now that he intended keeping his pledge, that his meeting her that afternoon was accidental.

"Are you very busy with your boat?" Señorita de Rico asked.

"Very," Atwell told her. "And the real work won't begin for another week."

"Ah! When you start to take out the platinum!" Dolores' eyes were gleaming. "Do you think your concession is very rich?"

"We can't tell until we've worked it a while," Atwell answered.

Strange, the dislike he'd taken to this young woman! He didn't exactly understand it. She had

certainly been kind enough to him. She could hardly have done more for him if he had been her own brother. And yet a strange bitterness assailed him when he thought of the debt he owed her—and anxiety possessed him when he thought of settling it. It was not that he wished to avoid the obligation, he had assured himself many times. It was the unknown quantity that bothered him. What would she ask of him? When would she come to him? Come she must, sooner or later. He knew that. He knew, too, that he was honor bound to do as she asked.

As time passed, Atwell became more and more uncomfortable. Although Dolores, and even Phyllis, went out of their way to put him at his ease, he felt like an intruder. Tea was served. He handled his plate and cup awkwardly. Both of them, he knew, would think that he had never had any social training, which was not a long way from the truth. Afternoon tea had not been served on the dredgers he had superintended; hands roughened and calloused by hard work were not readily adaptable to the handling of a delicate china cup.

Hackwood returned at last. Despite his hatred of the man and all he represented, Atwell welcomed the sight of the tall, commanding form.

"Well, well, I'm glad to see you, Atwell," he welcomed the younger man warmly. "I'd been hoping you'd come up and say 'Hello.' It gets rather lonesome in this neck of the woods with only the

native workmen around. How is everything going on the dredger?"

"Oh, as well as might be expected," Atwell answered negligently. "We'll have her working in a few days."

"Good! I'm glad to hear it." A perfect actor was James Hackwood. Listening to him, watching his gray eyes, Atwell would almost have sworn that the man was sincere in every word he said. And yet he knew that the mahogany operator could not be, knew that his very existence was built upon a fabrication of falsehood and deceit and double-dealing.

The talk went on idly for some time. Atwell took little part in it, his mind busy with his problem. He should talk to Hackwood alone, and yet he saw little opportunity of getting him to one side without openly suggesting it. Neither did he care to do that; it seemed so crude. At last he decided that it would do no harm to come out frankly and bring up the question of the rafts, particularly as the one which had come down the river had belonged to Señorita de Rico.

"Miss de Rico was telling me about your losing a raft in the storm last night," he began as casually as possible.

Hackwood nodded, frowning. "Yes. We lost about three hundred thousand feet. And it was all my fault. It was plain, unadulterated carelessness on my part, otherwise it would never have got away."

"Carelessness!" The exclamation was one of sur-

prise—not that a man of Hackwood's capabilities should be careless, but that he should voluntarily shoulder the blame. At the very least, Atwell had expected some sort of an evasion.

"Yes. I knew the river was due for a big rise and I ordered extra lines put out. It was a disagreeable night, as you undoubtedly know, and I failed to go down and see that this was done. It wasn't, as I found out afterward, and the raft got away."

"Do you know that it very nearly sent our dredger to the bottom of the river?" Atwell asked casually.

"No! You don't mean it!" Hackwood exclaimed.

The women, too, expressed surprise and concern. "Oh, I hope it didn't do any damage!" Dolores declared fervently.

"No," Atwell smiled. "Fortunately we saw it coming in time and managed to get the boat out of the way. But it was a mighty close call."

"Say, now, I'm mighty sorry about that," Hackwood said feelingly. "Are you sure there wasn't any damage done? If there was, you know, I'll be glad to make it all right with you."

"The only damage was a few severed lines," Atwell told him, "and they can be spliced easily enough. What I came up about, however, was to ask you to give us warning when you send down another raft. Our boat is out in the middle of the stream now, and until we get to working and dig our own pond outside the main channel, our position is more or less precarious."

"Of course, I realize that perfectly," Hackwood responded readily. "That raft would never have come down last night if I had been on the job, as I most certainly should have been. You see, lumbering conditions are a little different here than they are in most places. The customary way to get timber down-stream is to dump the logs in at high water and let them go. But here we can't do that on account of the difficulty of controlling them at the mouth of the river, log booms not being feasible because they would interfere with navigation. So we lash the logs together into a raft and send them down just after a rise, when there is water enough to float them and, at the same time, not so much but that the rafts can be controlled and taken in tow by tugs just below your camp."

"I understand," Atwell nodded. "But I just thought it wouldn't do any harm to remind you of the danger to our dredger if you sent your rafts down without warning."

"I am very glad you came," the other assured him. "You did just right. And I promise you that it won't happen again. Now if you will excuse me, I shall order dinner for us. You'll stay, of course, Atwell."

"No, no! I'm sorry," the visitor interposed hastily. "I must get back to camp. I have stayed away longer now than I had intended."

"Nonsense!" Hackwood insisted. "It will be dark before you get back now anyway. So you might just

as well stay until after dinner and go down by moonlight."

"Of course he'll stay," Señorita de Rico put in. "He can't run away like this, when he has made such a stranger of himself all these weeks. He *has* to stay."

Atwell wanted to glance at Phyllis and yet did not dare. She had not seconded the invitation of the others—to look at her would seem to prompt her.

"You'll stay, of course," Hackwood said confidently. "I have a first rate cook and I can promise you as fine a dinner as you have had in a long time."

Atwell did want to stay, his antagonism toward Hackwood, his virtual fear of Dolores, his pledge to Phyllis notwithstanding. Not until then, perhaps, did he realize how his isolation in camp had palled on him and worn his nerves. Shorty was companionable, of course, he was the best partner in the world. But after all, Atwell longed mightily for the companionship of others, longed for an opportunity to talk to some one besides Shorty and the rough-spoken crew.

"I'll stay," he said at last, hating himself for his weakness.

"That's fine!" Hackwood said enthusiastically. "Now if you will excuse me, I'll give a few orders to our cook." He walked to the door which led into the house, but paused with his hand on the knob.

"Hello!" he exclaimed. "It looks as though this was my busy day. Another guest."

The others swung around in their chairs and looked down the path toward the boat landing. A long canoe, manned by four men, glided up to the pier. In it was a single passenger, a man in spotless white linen. Atwell did not recognize him at first. Not until he heard a muffled exclamation from Dolores, did it dawn upon him who the visitor was.

Governor Xavier Juarte was disembarking at the landing.

CHAPTER XXIV

XAVIER JUARTEZ, governor of the state of Condota, was in an unusually pleasant frame of mind as he climbed the steps to the pier and started up the graveled path to the house. Only one thing cast its shadow over his good nature—that was the failure of Hackwood's raft to wreck the dredger. He did not understand what had averted such a catastrophe; he only knew that his plans had in some way gone awry and this always piqued him.

Otherwise, however, things were going unusually well and he was a bit proud of himself. Dolores had been very nice to him of late; his plans for a new day in Andegoya, and incidentally a new president, were progressing swiftly; in short, the situation appeared to be well in hand.

Although he knew he would find Miss Montague and Dolores at the lumber camp, he was a little taken back to see Atwell. He recovered promptly, however, and after he had bowed to the two ladies and shaken hands with Hackwood, he turned to the young American with outstretched hand.

"I am very glad to see you, Señor Atwell," he said earnestly. "I have been wanting to talk to you and explain the part I played in that—er—regrettable incident in Condota. I suppose you thought I was quite merciless."

"Well, I shall have to confess that I did think something of the kind," Atwell answered, frankly puzzled at the stand the governor was taking.

"Of course! Of course! Very regrettable, indeed! However, I had no intention of allowing your execution. At the last minute I should have ordered a delay."

"Should you?" the other smiled skeptically.

"Naturally. I was convinced of your innocence, particularly when Señor Hackwood vouched for you. However, I dared not interfere except as a last resort. President Quilla is very popular in Condota, as you may know. My constituents would have made it extremely unpleasant for me if I had interfered in the punishment of a man who, they believed, was concerned in a plot against the president. You understand my position, señor?"

"Yes, I believe I do," Atwell said slowly.

"And you are willing to overlook my apparent heartlessness?" Juarte persisted.

"Your apology is accepted, governor."

The *entendente* turned to the others, smiling, rubbing his hands together. "I feel much better now. That has weighed heavily on my mind. I knew my actions would be misunderstood. Indeed, who could blame Señor Atwell? I am very glad it has all been straightened out."

They talked a while of commonplaces. Then Hackwood turned to Phyllis. "It is cooler now, Miss

Montague. Would you care to be shown around the camp? The work is quite interesting."

"I should like it very much," the girl nodded readily.

"And perhaps Atwell would like to go with you. Have you ever seen any logging of mahogany, Atwell?"

"No, I never have."

"Care to go?"

Atwell seemed to hesitate, despite the fact that Hackwood's inference had been plain to all of them. "Yes, I'd like to look around a bit," he said at last.

"Good! I'll have my superintendent take you over the workings."

Atwell and Phyllis departed in tow of an obsequious native. Hackwood watched them out of earshot and then turned to Dolores and Juarte. "We'll go inside now." He added, as an afterthought: "That Atwell is a meddlesome fool."

Dolores laughed softly as she entered the door which Hackwood held open for her. "You were quite insistent that he stay to dinner, if I remember rightly."

"I had my reasons, my dear lady," the other answered laconically.

She turned on him swiftly, her soft laughter dead on her lips, her dark eyes searching his face. Very softly she asked: "What do you mean, James?"

Hackwood shrugged his shoulders, chuckling over her concern. "We won't discuss it now, Dolores,"

he answered easily. "We have more important things to talk about. Is that not so, governor?"

Juarteز nodded without answering and followed them into a large room. It was a pleasant room with a broad expanse of windows looking out over the river, deeply cushioned chairs, soft carpets. Dolores sat down and negligently lighted a cigaret. The governor remained standing, as did Hackwood, who stood regarding the other through narrowed eyes.

"Well, Xavier? What is the news from the front?" he asked, half facetiously.

The governor laughed at this. "I do not know much about the news from the front. But the news from the rear is very encouraging. The third and fourth shipments of arms came in to-day. They arrived safely, thank God, and have already been distributed to the various depots."

"And no one is suspicious?" Hackwood asked, watching the other.

"No one!" Juarteз shrugged his shoulders expressively. "Many are suspicious that plans are being laid for a revolution, of course. That is always so. Was there ever a time in the history of my dear country when some one wasn't planning a revolution?"

"Never mind the dear country stuff, Xavier," Hackwood put in sarcastically. "Your country means about the same to you as it does to me—how much can I bleed it for?"

"No, no, no!" the governor made haste to disclaim. "It is patriotism that actuates—"

"Cut it, governor! Cut it!" Hackwood ordered. "Let's get back to the point at issue. You have spies out. You know the situation. Are you certain that no one suspects we are implicated in a plot of any kind?"

"Positive! No one suspects—save possibly that Atwell fellow."

"I've thought of him," Hackwood nodded. "I think he is suspicious of me. That partner of his is in the know, too. He is an old friend of the president and he knows how to put two and two together. It might be well—" He shrugged his shoulders suggestively, without completing the thought.

Juarteز nodded and would have spoken, had not Dolores cut in. "What might be well?" she demanded.

Hackwood turned on her impatiently. "To get Atwell out of the way," he told her sharply.

The young woman shook her head. "No," she said steadfastly. "If you do that, not a cent of my money—"

"Come, come, come!" Juarteز cried. "I have not come up here to discuss young American fools. It is the making of nations that concerns—"

"No," Hackwood interrupted with a calm shake of his head and a slow smile, "it is the awarding of valuable concessions that concerns us. At least, that is what concerns me. If our plans go through, you

can go ahead with the making of nations, governor. I shall take the concessions. However, let us not cross too many bridges. We shall discuss the making of nations and the awarding of concessions when the time comes. The important point right now is: Have you fixed the day?"

"The sixth!" Juarte declared. "A week from Tuesday."

"As good as any. And your plans?"

"General Martinez and General Gualdo have worked them out in the most minute detail, the taking of the garrisons, the customs house in Condota, the government buildings. All are complete. We have the men, we have the arms, we have the will. Two more capable soldiers than Martinez and Gualdo would be hard to find. General Martinez is—"

"Never mind the soft soap, governor," Hackwood cut in. "Those two generals are about as capable as a couple of first class American buck privates. However, they should do—considering the opposition. Any more plans?"

"What I can't understand," Señorita de Rico put in abstractedly, "is why you are so eager to make Atwell lose his concession. If our plans—"

At this point Hackwood broke into a hearty laugh. "While we are making nations," he remarked to the governor, "she is thinking about Atwell. Women are certainly queer creatures."

"But you have not answered my question," the

young woman persisted, no wise embarrassed by Hackwood's derision.

"All right," the American laughed. "To keep peace in the family I shall tell you. Atwell's concession is the governor's ace in the hole. Know what that means, Dolores? Well, it means that if this plan of ours is nipped in the bud, as it may be, the governor will have something to fall back on to get a little ready cash. He is financially decrepit right now, Dolores, as you may know. If our plans fail, he will be more so. However, he will still be our governor, for he has played his cards very well and in the event of failure he will probably come out of the mess all right. And being our governor, he will need money, far more money than the office pays. So that little concession which Cunningham and Atwell have will be his ace in the hole. He should be able to peddle it for enough to tide him over. Understand, señorita?"

"Perfectly. Thank you. Only—Señor Atwell must not be—put out of the way," the woman declared firmly.

"Very well. We'll discuss that later. Any further plans, Xavier?"

"I have saved the most adroit detail for the last," the governor said with pride. "On the night of the sixth, when our men will take over the reins of government, do you know where you will be?"

"You bet I do," Hackwood nodded readily. I'll

be right out here in the jungle, as far away from the festivities as possible."

"No, you are wrong," Juartez smiled. "You will be at my home on the river. Every officer of the army, every official of the government within five hundred miles, every important man and woman in the state will be there. You have forgotten the date, my friend. The governor's annual ball takes place on the sixth."

Hackwood chuckled. "Clever, aren't you, Xavier? Quite a nice little plan to get all the officers away from their posts when you spring your coup."

"And that is not all, my friend. I shall be there, too, do not forget. And who in the world would ever suppose that the leader of a revolt would be giving a great ball on the night the opening gun was fired? Who will be so bold as to implicate me, when I shall be leading the grand march when the garrison at Condota is fired upon?"

"You think almost as much of your skin as I do of mine, don't you, Xavier?" Hackwood grinned.

"Oh, but it is not that. It is a master stroke to cast off suspicion, to get the officers away and at the same time—"

"Stay away yourself," Hackwood supplied with a short laugh. "All right, Xavier. Joking aside, I am willing to admit it is a good idea. In fact, it is a surprisingly good idea—considering its source."

The governor's chest swelled—he failed to catch the irony of Hackwood's remark. "It is not bad,

not bad, James," he admitted. "And you will attend the ball, will you?"

"Naturally," Hackwood answered offhand, his thoughts apparently on something else. "Haven't I asked Miss Montague to accompany me?"

He failed to see the smoldering fires in the dark eyes of Señorita de Rico. Indeed, had he seen them, he would have been impressed but little. His was the mind of a perfect egoist—careful indeed of his own sensibilities, caring not a whit for the feelings of others.

Juarteز saw them, however, and an odd, enigmatical smile twitched the corners of his mouth. It was as though he were piqued slightly and at the same time were pleased. Notwithstanding the part he was playing, Xavier Juarteز was not without pride of race. He admired his countrymen and his countrywomen. It hurt him, probably, to see Dolores de Rico cast so surely and so casually aside by a foreigner. But it must have pleased him, too—for the governor's passion for Dolores was of many years' standing.

When Hackwood strolled to a window and stood staring out at the river, Juarteز bent above the shining head of the señorita. "Never mind, my dear," he consoled softly. "You shall lead the grand march with me."

Dolores might not have heard, for all the heed she paid him. She rose swiftly, turned and faced Hackwood.

"James!" she said sharply.

"Yes?" the man answered negligently, turning.

"What about Atwell?"

"Well, what about him?"

"Have I your word that you will not harm him?"

He looked at her narrowly, a faint smile on his thin lips. Very slowly, his eyes never leaving hers, he said: "I shall give you my word not to harm him—provided you tell me why you are so interested in him."

"I have told you once," the woman reminded, dropping her eyes.

"You mean that night in Condota after he had escaped?"

"Yes."

Hackwood laughed derisively. "Don't be foolish, Dolores!" he chafed. "You don't love Atwell, any more than—well, than I love you, for instance."

It was a cruel, deliberate blow and it struck home. Dolores paled. Her fists clenched slowly and then unclenched. Defiantly she met his gaze.

"James," she said very calmly, "some day I am going to kill you."

A low chuckle was his only response,

CHAPTER XXV

BOB ATWELL had been extremely reluctant about starting on a tour of the camp with Phyllis Montague. In view of the pledge he had made not to seek her company, he would much rather have been starting down the river in his canoe. Still, he told himself as they moved down the gravel path away from the house, he had virtually been forced to accompany her. Hackwood's invitation, while friendly enough, had been more of an order than a suggestion. Atwell had had no other choice than to accept it.

He stole a quick glance at the girl who walked by his side. Her blue eyes were on the path; she seemed absorbed with her thoughts, oblivious of his presence. For the space of ten minutes or more they walked behind their guide in silence, while the native explained the workings of the logging camp in halting English. Atwell neither heard the man's words nor took cognizance of the details that were pointed out. He observed that Phyllis, too, was taking little notice of the logging operations.

At last he declared earnestly: "I am very sorry I have to impose my presence upon you, Miss Montague. If I had known you were here, I shouldn't have come up."

She turned startled eyes upon him; her manner

was not entirely unfriendly. "Why not, Mr. Atwell? You had business up here, didn't you?"

"The business could have waited," he said. "And I haven't forgotten a certain resolution I made the last time I saw you. I intended to keep that pledge—and I still intend to."

She was silent a moment, while their guide talked on, pointing to a number of natives who were working a heavy log onto a skidway.

"Don't you think you are going to extremes a bit?" Phyllis asked none too steadily. "After all, there are so few Americans in Condota. And we might as well all be friends."

He looked at her quickly, hardly crediting his ears. Was this an overture of peace? Did this mean that she had at last come to the conclusion that he had taken no part in the gun-running affair? He wondered, hardly daring to put the question.

"Under other circumstances, I would be greatly pleased to be your friend," Atwell said at last. "I am lonesome for home and the States, as without doubt you are. At least, we have that much in common. But until I can come to you with a clean slate—well, I won't come to you at all."

"But the whole thing has blown over now," Phyllis reminded him. "If you are innocent—and truthfully, Mr. Atwell, I have little doubt but that you are—I am afraid you will find it almost impossible to prove it."

"I'll prove it—if it takes ten years," he said resolutely.

His dark eyes half closed as he spoke; there was a determined set to his jaw; his broad shoulders squared themselves involuntarily. Although he did not realize it at once, the girl's eyes were upon him, measuring, weighing, searching. It was not until she laughed softly that he swung around to her. With a start of surprise he saw that she was holding out her small hand.

"You have proved it right now, so far as I am concerned," Phyllis said. "I am sorry that I misjudged you, Mr. Atwell."

He took her hand, puzzled a bit at what had brought on her change of heart, but undeniably thrilled at the warm contact. "Thank you," he said constrainedly. "It is nice of you to say that you believe I am square. Do you really mean it, or are you just saying it to make me feel better?"

"I really mean it!"

Atwell sighed and shook his head slowly. "The fact still remains that my name is under a cloud. And until I can clear it—well, my pledge holds good."

The girl nodded thoughtfully. "I expected you to say that. And I admire you for it. Now let's go on. Our guide will think we aren't interested in what he is showing us."

Which, indeed, was the truth. For more than an hour they followed along behind the voluble native,

listening and yet hearing nothing, looking and yet seeing nothing. Neither spoke again until their guide had departed and they were nearing the house. Then Phyllis touched her companion's arm and asked in a low voice:

"Mr. Atwell, are you quite convinced that that raft got away last night by accident?"

Atwell turned to her swiftly, searching her blue eyes. He did not speak for a space; then he said: "No, I am not at all convinced. In fact, I am quite certain that it was a deliberate attempt to wreck our boat." He continued to stare at her, puzzled. "I am a little surprised at the question, though. May I ask what made you suspicious?"

"Really, I don't know," she shook her head slowly. "Nothing in particular—and everything. Somehow, I just got the idea that everything around here wasn't on the level."

Atwell laughed shortly. "I am afraid you are quite right. Naturally enough, I have had that idea since the first day I landed here."

"But I don't understand!" Phyllis exclaimed bewilderedly.

"What don't you understand, Miss Montague?"

"I don't understand why they should want to wreck your dredger."

"So that our friend the governor may have an opportunity to peddle that concession again," Atwell told her, and went on to explain the situation in more detail.

The girl was incredulous. "You mean to say that Juarteز charged your partner thirty thousand dollars for that concession?"

"Yes. It is the only way we could get it. The practice of selling concessions is common down here, I understand."

"And now he is trying to make you fall down in proving up on it, so that he may sell it again!"

"Exactly! At least, that is what Shorty Cunningham believes. Shorty has been in this country a good many years and he should know what he is talking about."

Phyllis sighed regretfully. "You know, the longer I live down here and the more I see of these people, the more I admire my own country and my own countrymen."

"I quite agree with you," Atwell smiled.

They had reached the house and the conversation was pursued no further. Atwell, however, was in a warm glow of happiness. He knew no more about the workings of a logging camp than he had known when he left the house. He did know more, however, about the workings of Phyllis Montague's mind. He knew that he had her sympathy and confidence; and the realization raised the barometer of his spirits immeasurably, despite the fact that he was still determined to do nothing to further their friendship until he could come to her with a clean slate.

"Well, did you find the work interesting?" Hack-

wood asked them as they entered the large drawing room.

"Very," Atwell lied valiantly. "We were quite absorbed by it."

The American noticed that Dolores de Rico was rather pale and shaken. The governor's face, on the contrary, was flushed. Atwell suspected that he had been drinking.

Dinner was served a short time later. It was rather a light-hearted affair, thanks to the cocktails and wine. Atwell and Phyllis, however, took no part in the drinking and little part in the conversation.

The *entendente*, in particular, grew more joyous as the meal progressed. His good humor was unbounded. His compliments to Phyllis and Dolores became broader. Several times he reiterated his good will toward Atwell and begged forgiveness for his recent inability to exercise judicial clemency. Mellowed by the liquor, the governor was gay, expansive, the prince of good fellows.

Hackwood, Atwell noted, drank sparingly. Almost obvious was his determination to keep his head clear and to keep the conversation well in hand. Several times he interrupted Juarteiz when the latter seemed about to plunge into matters that did not concern the present gathering. The frown that settled over Hackwood's face as the meal progressed made it plain that he was ill pleased with the governor's conduct.

Watching the moves of these men as closely as

though they had been pawns in a chess game, Atwell readily came to the conclusion that Hackwood feared the governor would reveal something not intended for the ears of strangers. He recalled rumors of revolution that had drifted up the river to the camp. He realized, too, that the smuggling of arms could point to nothing less than insurrection. The obvious conclusion was one that had been in the back of his mind for many weeks; indeed, it had been pointed out by Shorty Cunningham on the day following his arrest; Hackwood and Juarte were plotting the overthrow of President Quilla. And Dolores de Rico, without doubt, was in some way connected with the plot.

Atwell's lips hardened as this conclusion was borne home to him more and more strongly by the actions of the governor and Hackwood. Revolution would mean disaster to himself and Shorty. Under a new government, their concession would surely be revoked. Save for what little might be realized on the dredger if they were compelled to dismantle it and ship it back to the States, every dollar they had sunk in their enterprise would be lost.

But there was another and even greater reason for that grimness about Atwell's lips. His debt to Señorita de Rico was still unpaid. Any day she might call on him and he would be compelled to do her bidding. In a time of national crisis, with the country torn asunder by revolution, who could know when she might come to him for aid?

The señorita, during dinner, had tried valiantly to match the governor's light-heartedness. But to Atwell's eyes, her attempt fell flat. Her laughter was a bit too forced, her smile a bit too set, her voice a bit too strained. She seemed to be laboring under the stress of emotion. What had caused it, Atwell did not know.

One thing, however, became very patent as the meal progressed. That was the relation between these three strange people. Any one with half an eye, Atwell told himself, could have seen that the governor was wildly in love with Dolores de Rico—his eyes devoured her every movement, his voice was silky smooth when he spoke to her, his very manner proclaimed to the world that he worshiped her.

And Dolores de Rico was just as obviously and just as deeply in love with James Hackwood. She showed it too, not as patently as the governor; but to a sober man with a keen eye, who watched them all and said but little, it was plain enough. Atwell pitied her a little—Hackwood's insusceptibility to her charms, and they were many, was easily to be seen.

A strange mix-up, Atwell told himself, and wondered vaguely if Hackwood were impervious to feminine charms. Or was he—

The thought startled him and he darted a searching glance at the mahogany operator. Hackwood was in the act of filling Phyllis' coffee cup from a silver pot. His left hand rested lightly on the girl's for

an instant—ever so lightly but with just a suggestion of a caress.

For the briefest instant there was a look in Hackwood's gray eyes that Atwell never quite forgot. It was a look of longing and suppressed desire that told its story as plainly as though he said: "Phyllis, I am going to have you if I have to move heaven and earth!"

Atwell's fists clenched under the table. He breathed once, a quick, gasping inhalation. Then Hackwood's eyes, raising from Phyllis, chanced to meet those of the younger man squarely. For a breathless moment that seemed eternity their glances held.

Fire flamed in their eyes. They were two men reverted to the primitive. There was no attempt at disguise, no attempt at evasion. The gloss, the petty deceits of civilization were swept away. The masks were down, revealing a hatred as bitter and lasting as death.

Hackwood's gaze was the first to fall. He smiled, maddeningly complacent, surprisingly calm.

"I hope you are enjoying your dinner, Atwell," he said, without a tremor in his voice.

Atwell mumbled an answer, knowing not what it was. He was conscious of only two things.

He loved Phyllis Montague.

He could kill James Hackwood then and there without a qualm.

CHAPTER XXVI

It was doubtful if any of the others observed the tension between Hackwood and Atwell. Dolores and the governor had drunk a little too much to be particularly observant; Phyllis' eyes were on her plate. Dazed as he was by what he had discovered, Atwell realized this and was thankful. About Juarte and Dolores he did not care a great deal. But if Phyllis had seen that flash of hatred that had passed between himself and Hackwood he would have been deeply mortified.

As it was, he knew that his face had grown violently red and the hand that held his fork was trembling. He strove to calm himself, fighting for self-control, hating Hackwood the while for the man's maddening poise. Nothing seemed to upset the other; nothing seemed to shatter his calmness. Atwell envied him a little, and hated him at the same time.

The tension, for it still persisted, on Atwell's part at least, was broken by the governor.

"Atwell, are you going to honor me by attending my annual costume ball?" he asked across the table.

The young man looked up, wondering what had prompted such a question. "I don't believe I have received an invitation, sir," he answered, striving to keep his voice level.

"Then I shall send you one immediately," Juarteز declared pompously. "I want you and your partner to be there. And I shall not take no for an answer. Our other friends here will be there. Señor Hackwood is taking Señorita Montague. I am taking Señorita de Rico. And you, my friend—" he laughed boisterously at his little joke—"may take your partner."

"When will the ball take place, governor?" Atwell parried, groping for some polite way to refuse an invitation which he suspected would never have been extended if the governor had been wholly sober. "My partner and I are rather busy now, you know."

"The ball is on the sixth, a week from Tuesday."

A week from Tuesday! It was their last day of grace—if returns were not made to the government by that day he and Shorty would lose their concession. Atwell glanced at Phyllis. Her eyes were on him. Was there a hint of eagerness in their blue depths? His heart leaped when she spoke.

"You'd better decide to come, Mr. Atwell. The governor's parties are very successful."

Atwell smiled to hide the bitterness in his eyes. James Hackwood, prince of rogues, was taking this comely young woman to the ball—a bitter pill for Atwell. But by the same token he knew that he himself would have to go too; nothing could keep him away.

"You are very kind, governor," he said steadily.

"I can't speak for my partner, but I shall be glad to come."

"Ah, my friend, you honor me!" Juartez raised his glass and laughed enigmatically.

Atwell started. He didn't like that laugh. It seemed to have a hidden meaning. It was the laugh of a man who knows he holds the winning cards, who is waiting only for the proper moment to show them down and rake in the chips. Then the governor's eyes met Hackwood's. The laugh died, became a sickly smile. Juartez gulped his wine.

Watching the play and wondering, Atwell felt as though he had been caught in a web during the last hour. He felt that the destinies of these men and women had become inextricably tangled with his own. With the feeling came a sense of futility, of being drawn deeper and deeper into the net of their weaving. Although volition was there, he could make no move to save himself; although the will to live his life as an individual was as strong as ever, his power of thought and action had fled. He was caught, indubitably and irrevocably.

The power was theirs: Hackwood's, Phyllis', Juartez's, Dolores'. Struggle against them as he would, fight to keep himself clear, it would still be those four who would move the net. His own struggles would be as nothing against them.

A gambler he was, gambling with life against four persons who had marked the deck. Their marks unknown to him, what chance had he to beat them?

Through bitter eyes he saw the situation, hated it, and yet knew he was powerless to change it.

Immediately after dinner Atwell expressed his apologies and made ready to start down the river to the camp. It was after nine then—dinner had dragged interminably—and he knew that Shorty would be worried about his continued absence. He had expected to be back shortly after dark.

"Do not forget, my friend!" the governor cautioned gayly as he shook hands with Atwell. "A week from Tuesday! We come in costume and unmask at midnight."

"I shan't forget, thank you," Atwell responded, trying to appear hearty and finding it very hard.

He shook hands with Dolores, bade her good night. As he took Phyllis' hand the girl met his eyes boldly. "Come to see us when you are in town."

The invitation was undeniably cordial and sincere; and yet Atwell shook his head. "I'm sorry, but I am afraid it will be a long time before I am in town."

He turned to Hackwood. Compelled to take the other's hand, for however brief an instant, he felt the fire of hatred course hotly through his veins. Hackwood was smiling, vaguely insolent. It was all Atwell could do to keep from lashing out with his clenched fist.

"Hope you've had a pleasant time, Atwell," the older man said cheerfully. "Come again sometime."

"Thank you. I enjoyed the dinner very much."

More than that he could not trust himself to say.

He was outside at last, stumbling down the path in the moonlight. His thoughts were wildly incoherent. His emotions ran the gamut from anger to compassion, from fear to fortitude.

Dazed and shaken, he reached the pier and looked about for his canoe. He found it moored at the lower end of the dock, his two boatmen sound asleep. He roused them with a terse command, took his place amidship and ordered them to shove off. The bow man sleepily clambered to his feet, untied the painter and called to the man in the stern. The latter stood up. They leaned on their long *palancas*; the slender craft slid out into the current.

Atwell, sitting on the bottom of the canoe, leaned back on his elbow and gave himself over to thought. Wild thoughts they were, tempestuous thoughts. For a long time they were not clear; they were a mere hodge-podge of scattering impressions. But out of the chaos one realization loomed as clearly as though it were graven indelibly on steel: he loved Phyllis Montague!

He had no knowledge of how long he had loved her—it might have been since the first time he had met her. He had no way of knowing how long he might have gone on loving her without actually realizing it—for months their relations might have continued as they had been, had he not chanced to observe that movement of Hackwood's hand, the look in his gray eyes.

Love was a strange thing, he reflected, quite un-

aware that millions of men since time began have thought that self-same thought. At one minute he was possessed of a strange exhilaration, more powerful than he had ever experienced before; at another moment he was plunged in the depths of despair at the futility of it all; again, when he thought of Hackwood's hand on Phyllis' hand and the proprietary, possessing look in his gray eyes, he felt a rage sweep over him that was so insensate as to make of him a potential murderer. Indeed, love was a strange thing—and particularly strange under such circumstances and to a man who had never before experienced such emotion.

His thoughts became more coherent at last. His pulse became slower. He became conscious of the fact that he was very tired. The night before had been trying; he had slept but poorly that morning; the nervous strain of the afternoon and evening had left him mentally exhausted.

Resolutely he tried to put all thought out of his mind. A thousand and one problems beat about his brain, like bees bombarding a hive, but one by one he turned them aside. He was in no condition to think clearly. Time enough to dwell on these things when his brain was really functioning. It was a long trip down to the camp—he might as well get in a little sleep.

He must have dozed, for he realized suddenly that a canoe was alongside his own, though he had not heard the splash of its *palancas*. He straightened up,

to look straight into the eyes of Phyllis Montague. An exclamation of surprise escaped his lips.

"I know you didn't expect to see me," she began, as the gunwales of their canoes scraped together.

"I'm surprised, yes," he said very slowly. "But your face—it's so white and strained. Maybe—it's the moonlight."

"No, it isn't the moonlight," she replied steadily.

Her hand crossed the gunwales. Atwell felt something heavy drop into his lap. He looked down, blinking dazedly. Then he reached out and closed his hand over a cold object that he knew was an automatic pistol.

"I—I don't understand," he faltered.

"The explanation is very simple," Phyllis stated tersely. "You left your own boatmen behind at Hackwood's camp. They were bribed, probably. These two men," she motioned to the two natives in Atwell's boat, "have orders to kill you!"

CHAPTER XXVII

For a moment Atwell was struck dumb with consternation. He could hardly credit his ears. Phyllis had said his boatmen had been ordered to murder him. He glanced at the man in the bow, who stood immobile, leaning on his *palanca*. He could see, now that it was called to his attention, that the man was not his own boatman. In the darkness he had not observed his face closely. A glance at the man in the stern and the blood ran chill in Atwell's veins.

Getting to his knees, he raised his gun. "Out you go!" he ordered sharply in Spanish. "Dive, damn you!"

There was a muttered protest from both ends of the craft. Atwell trained his gun on the man in the bow. There was a low whimper. Then the man dove headlong into the black, oily water. A splash from the stern and Atwell was alone in the canoe. Two dark heads, gleaming wetly in the moonlight, were moving slowly toward the shore.

As he turned to Phyllis he experienced again that odd feeling of futility that had gripped him at dinner. He was still caught in the net, tossed about by powers over which he had no control, a plaything for men and women who were stronger than he. Twice his life had been saved by a woman. He realized it

with a vague sense of bitterness. Not that he wasn't grateful—no, it wasn't that. How could he be other than grateful? And yet it rankled deeply to be so indebted to a woman.

"I wonder if you'd tell me a little about this thing," he began at last. He laughed, rather unsteadily. "I am more or less interested, you know."

"I'm afraid I don't know a great deal," the girl answered.

"Then tell me what you know."

"All right. Hold onto my boat. I'll have my men pole us over to the bank."

Atwell grasped the gunwale of Phyllis' boat and the girl gave a sharp order and the two canoes were propelled toward the left bank of the river, Atwell's erstwhile boatmen having made for the right bank. The canoes struck bottom and came to rest in the shallow water. Atwell nodded toward the four men who manned Phyllis' boat.

"Would you rather be alone?" he asked.

"No, it's all right. These are Señorita de Rico's boatmen. She says they are to be trusted. Besides, they do not speak English."

"Señorita de Rico!" Atwell exclaimed in an awed tone. "Is she playing some part in this, too?"

"She sent me down the river to warn you," Phyllis told him simply.

Atwell gasped. Again! Again Dolores had saved his life, if he were to believe what Phyllis had just told him. The artifices of the woman were uncanny.

Was there anything she did not know? Anything she could not do?

"Please tell me all about it, Miss Montague," Atwell requested soberly.

"I excused myself immediately after you left," Phyllis told him. "I wasn't feeling well and—well, to be quite frank, I didn't care greatly about the company. I went to my room and, although it was in another part of the house, I could hear some kind of an argument in progress. I had only been there a short time when Señorita Dolores came to my room. Her face was very white and she seemed greatly excited.

"She told me that Hackwood and Juarteiz had conspired to kill you and had substituted two of their own men for your boatmen. These men were to kill you on the way down to your camp and throw your body in the river. She asked me to take her boat and warn you, knowing that her four men could travel faster than your two and hoping that I would overtake you before it was too late. She didn't dare go herself, because she said she was watched and Hackwood would know if she left the house. So I sneaked out the back door and came down here."

Atwell nodded. "I don't need to tell you how grateful I am, Miss Montague," he said feelingly. And then, after a pause, he asked: "Did Señorita de Rico give any reason for Hackwood's wanting to kill me?"

"She said it was something about the dredger. She

didn't know exactly what. She was excited, too, and didn't want to waste time explaining."

For several moments they sat face to face in their boats. Atwell watched the girl, wondering at the fact that she showed little or no excitement. His own nerves were calm, of course; his peril had been dissipated before he had even learned that it had existed. The girl was different, though. Most women, flying down the river in a race with death, would probably have fainted when it was all over. He recalled that Phyllis had fainted once before under somewhat similar circumstances and he was surprised that she exhibited no excitement. The hand that grasped the gunwale of her boat was steady; the rise and fall of her chest was regular. At last he broached a question.

"What do you think of this, Miss Montague? I admit that other men had been substituted for my boatmen. But do you really think that my life was in danger?"

Her gaze fell. Her hand left the gunwale and grasped the edge of her sweater, the fingers working nervously for a moment. When she raised her eyes there was bewilderment and uncertainty in them.

"I really don't know, Mr. Atwell," she shook her head slowly. "But—"

"Yes?" he prompted gently.

"I can't believe that James Hackwood would do such a thing!" Phyllis burst out passionately. "He is a hard business man, I know. He has a reputation

for being rather ruthless. But I am certain he is not a murderer."

"And yet you came down to warn me just the same?"

"Of course! I did not dare take a chance. I had to come, no matter how certain I was that Señorita de Rico was—" She broke off and looked away.

"Please go on," Atwell urged.

"That she was lying," Phyllis finished.

"You think she may have lied to you?"

"Yes. I am almost sure she did."

"But her excitement!"

"She is an excellent actress, you know."

"And my boatmen!"

"She could have changed them herself," Phyllis declared.

"But her reason!" Atwell objected. "I can't understand why she would do such a thing. Of course, she might want me to be indebted to her. A grandstand play, as it were."

Phyllis did not respond. She was gazing abstractedly down the river, where the moonlight made a path of silver on the black water. Watching her, Atwell became imbued with the idea that she knew more than she had told him. She seemed to be holding back something, whether facts or conjectures he did not know. He prompted her gently.

"Can you see any reason why Señorita de Rico should make a grandstand play like this?" he asked. "Unless, of course, I actually was in danger."

The girl nodded slowly. "Yes, I see a reason," she admitted reluctantly. "But I'd rather not discuss it."

Atwell's jaw set. Again that feeling of futility, the feeling of butting his head against a stone wall! Almost forgetting to whom he was talking, bent only on breaking this wall of mystery that hemmed him in on every side, he demanded:

"Don't you think I should know all the angles of this affair? It seems that I am more or less concerned in it."

The girl looked at him quickly, plainly surprised at the harsh note in his voice. She seemed to draw back slightly, her chin raised a fraction of an inch, her blue eyes met his piercingly.

"But as it happens, Mr. Atwell, you are not concerned in it at all," she rebuked him.

"No?" He laughed softly, amused at a statement that was so plainly anomalous. "What am I then? A mere pawn in some one else's game?"

She nodded quickly. "Yes. A mere pawn."

"I understand," he said. Then, quickly, "No, I don't understand, but I know what you mean. I'm sorry I questioned you. Naturally, when a young woman glides suddenly out of the night and tells me I would have been murdered had she not intervened, I was interested in getting as many details of the plot as I could. However, I apologize. If I wasn't concerned in it save as a pawn in another man's game—"

"Please!" the girl interrupted, staring at him ap-

pealingly. "I didn't mean to be secretive. It was a personal matter, that was all. But I see your point. I see that you won't rest easy or feel secure until I tell you everything. Only—it will be most embarrassing."

"Then I don't want you to tell me, Miss Montague," Atwell declared promptly. "You have been mighty decent to me and the last thing in the world I'd want to do would be to make things unpleasant for you. Let's forget about it."

"No, I won't." She shook her head obstinately. "It is your right to know. I can't leave this thing hanging over your head. I shall tell you all I know—all that I suspect."

She paused a moment, as though collecting her thoughts. Atwell did not speak. He watched her, though, and saw that her face was flushed and her eyes did not meet his. He was immediately penitent. He was on the point of speaking when Phyllis began:

"Señorita de Rico is very much in love with James Hackwood."

Atwell nodded quickly. "Yes, I gathered as much to-night. It was very plain."

"She is a Latin, you know. She is hot-blooded and quick-tempered. She would go to any extreme to win him. I don't believe she would even stop at murder to gain her ends. Only she doesn't work that way. She is clever. There are times when she reminds me of a tigress. The movements she makes are so smooth, so stealthy, so—so crafty and sly."

"The comparison is very apt," Atwell agreed with a nod. "She strikes me the same way."

Phyllis did not go on at once. Her small fingers, playing with the edge of her sweater, moved faster. Her chin was on her breast; her gaze was on the river at the far side of the canoe. Atwell regretted having interrupted her. Indeed, he felt very small and embarrassed; he wished he hadn't urged her to go into the matter further.

"Señorita de Rico is jealous of—me!" Phyllis went on constrainedly. "She would do anything in her power to undermine my faith in James Hackwood, to convince me that he is not worthy. That is why I think she made up this story about your being in danger. That is why she came to me and urged me to come down here instead of sending some one else. It is just a plot—just part of a plan to blacken James Hackwood. For I believe she knows—that he has asked me to marry him!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

DAZED and bewildered though he was, Atwell's predominant emotion was a deep sense of hurt. There was no anger; all feeling of anger toward Hackwood had passed for the time. There was no disappointment, no jealousy, only a dull pain that seemed to clutch his heart in a hand of ice.

He wanted to speak and yet there was nothing to say. He might offer his congratulations, but she had not told him she had accepted Hackwood's offer of marriage. He might ask her if she had—but no, that would be downright impertinent. He'd best keep his peace and let Phyllis do the talking, if there was any more to be done. Insofar as he was concerned, there was nothing more that could be said. His world had ended.

"Do you see why I am a little suspicious that the whole thing may be a hoax?" Phyllis asked after a time.

Atwell nodded, unwilling to betray his emotion by speaking.

"On the one hand, I am certain that James Hackwood would never stoop to murder, no matter what the issue involved," Phyllis went on. She spoke abstractedly, as though more to convince herself than Atwell. "And on the other hand, I am equally certain that Dolores de Rico would engineer a thing of

this sort to blacken Hackwood in my eyes. So there we are." She laughed rather unsteadily. "As I once heard a shell game expert calling in Colon: 'You pays your money and you takes your choice.' Does your opinion coincide with mine?"

"I'm sure I don't know," Atwell shook his head bewilderedly. "I know neither Hackwood nor Señorita de Rico well enough to pass judgment on their motives. I am certain, however, that Hackwood tried to wreck our dredge."

"Hackwood!" The name seemed to be wrenched from the girl.

"Yes. Who else?"

"But what interest would he have in putting you out of business?"

"The same interest as Juarte. They work hand in hand."

"Oh, I can't believe that!" the girl exclaimed. "I'm sure that Mr. Hackwood had nothing to do with it. It was Juarte that was responsible. I am sure it was."

"But Juarte wasn't up here," Atwell pointed out. "How could he have had a hand in it?"

"He could have sent men up to cut the lines, couldn't he?"

"Yes, I suppose he could," Atwell admitted reluctantly.

He wanted to plunge on and tell her all he knew of the relationship between Hackwood and Juarte. He wanted to tell her that it was Hackwood who had

been responsible for attempting to smuggle in those guns. There were many things he wanted to tell her—conjectures they were, for the most part, but strongly backed by fact and startling in their potentialities.

But he steadfastly refrained from any mention of his suspicions. To have done otherwise would have been most discourteous, in view of the admissions she had made to him. Nevertheless, it irked him exceedingly to be compelled to hold his peace.

"I'll be going back now," Phyllis told him. "They might find that I was missing and it would be very embarrassing. You may keep the pistol. You may need it."

He looked at her quickly, smiling. "Wouldn't that be admitting that my life actually was in danger?"

"Possibly," she acknowledged reluctantly. "If I had been absolutely certain that it wasn't, I should never have come down to warn you. But it was on the mere chance that Dolores was telling the truth that I came."

"And I am very grateful," Atwell assured her. "May I accompany you back up the river?"

"Oh, no! It isn't necessary. I'm not afraid."

"You said a few moments ago that Dolores de Rico would stop at nothing, even murder, to gain her ends. Wouldn't it be better if I went up with you? I could tie my canoe behind yours and it wouldn't slow you down a great deal."

"Oh, I'm afraid I exaggerated a bit when I said that," Phyllis returned, forcing a smile. "She wouldn't really harm me—not, at least, until everything else had failed."

"And you're certain you're not afraid to go back alone?" Atwell persisted.

"Quite certain, thank you."

"Very well. Good night, Miss Montague. And many thanks."

"Good night."

She gave an order to her boatmen. They bent to their work and the craft glided out into the center of the channel. Atwell watched it until it was lost to sight around a bend in the river. Then he cursed softly, without a great deal of malice. Hopeless, heavy of heart, he picked up a *palanca* that lay in the bottom of the canoe, got to his feet and pushed the boat away from the bank.

"Devil of a mess!" he commented aloud, as he leaned viciously on the long pole. "It nearly drives me crazy to think of her even speaking to that scoundrel, to say nothing of being so intimate with him that he has asked her to marry him. And I didn't even find out whether she had accepted him or not. Oh, well, she'd hardly be up at his camp if she hadn't. Stood up for him, too. Tried to convince me he was a square-shooter! Huh! I could change her mind in about five minutes."

Then his thoughts took another tack. After all, he asked himself, wasn't he evading the real issue?

Phyllis Montague played little part in the vital scheme of his life. What if she did marry Hackwood? It would mean a pain and heartache, a disappointment and bitterness. That was all. After a time he would get over it. Men always did. Why make himself miserable over a situation he had no power to change?

His arguments were logical—but unsatisfying. He sensed vaguely that love was not a game in which logic took a part. Rather, instinct and emotion moved the pawns. His line of reasoning, however straight it might be, came a long way from embracing his emotions. And it was his emotion that told him he loved Phyllis Montague.

“Better forget it!” he muttered as he drove his pole into the gravel and urged the canoe downstream. “Better forget about it! No use worrying. Worrying never did anybody any good. Too many things on my mind anyway.”

For a time, because of his strenuous labor with the *palanca*, he was compelled to keep his mind on his work. But after a mile or two of this his weary muscles rebelled and he was forced to strike a slower pace. And a slower pace meant thoughts of Phyllis.

“I wonder if Hackwood really intended to put me out of the way? Or was it just a plot on Dolores’ part? Too bad I didn’t keep those two natives in the boat. I might have hammered something out of them. . . .

"But what has the man got against me? Killing me off wouldn't stop the work on the dredger. He knows that Shorty would go ahead just the same. Wonder if he thinks I know too much about that gun-running business. That might be a motive. On the other hand, if I knew absolutely that he was guilty there is nothing much I could do. I might go to the president. I might gum up their plans for a revolution, if they've really got something like that up their sleeves. . . .

"Clever woman, that Señorita de Rico. Be just like her to fix up a game like that to queer Hackwood with Phyllis. Only thing about it, it didn't work. No, damn it! It didn't work. . . ."

Some time later he caught sight of another canoe proceeding swiftly up stream. Far below him, it was barely visible in the moonlight. At first he thought of pulling swiftly over to the bank and waiting under the overhanging shrubbery until the other boat had passed. Then, remembering that he was armed, he proceeded boldly down the stream. It was not until the other craft was within a hundred feet of him that he recognized its occupants: Shorty Cunningham and three natives. All four were swinging their *palancas* at a swift pace.

"Oh, Shorty!" he called.

Cunningham swore briefly. "Say, you're a fine one! Where the devil you been till this time o' night?"

Atwell laughed. "Where the devil you going this time o' night?" he countered.

"Going after you, o' course! 'You don't think I'm paddling around for exercise, do you? Where's your boatmen?"

"They deserted me up the river. Come on, get in my boat. I want to talk to you—alone."

Shorty silently changed canoes, ordered his own boatmen to follow along behind, and picked up a *palanca*. "What's on your mind, son?" he asked kindly, his flurry of anger quite dissipated.

"Why should James Hackwood try to kill me?" Atwell asked.

"Huh! What? Say, what're you trying to do? Kid me?"

"Not at all. Here's my tale of woe. I want your opinion."

Carefully he went over the events of the afternoon and evening, concealing nothing save his suddenly augmented interest in Phyllis Montague. "Now, Shorty," he concluded, "who was behind that business—Hackwood or Dolores de Rico?"

"Hackwood!" Shorty pronounced promptly.

"You think so? Why?"

"Because trouble is brewing and he is afraid you know too much about that gun-running job."

"What kind of trouble?"

"Revolution. The fireworks are due to start any time now. Remember that native who dropped into camp for a few hours the other day? Fellow that brought me a letter?"

"Yes."

"He was from President Quilla. The president wanted to know a few things about the political situation here. Knew that I was one man he could trust to give him the straight dope. Quilla knows that an insurrection is brewing. But he doesn't know where it will be sprung nor who is behind it."

"What did you tell him?"

"I told him the truth—that I didn't know a damned thing about it. But I also offered a few conjectures that he could take for what they were worth. I told him I was suspicious of Juartez, that I thought he was the man behind the gun. I also told him that Hackwood and the de Rico woman and a few others were putting up the money. Hackwood hopes to gain some valuable concessions in the back country; the woman is in on it—well, most likely because she has a crush on Hackwood and is willing to back him to the limit. So there you are."

"And you think that he actually intended to have those natives bump me off?" Atwell asked, feeling for the first time a chill that was not caused by the cold.

"Sure he did. Why not? Your two boatmen probably got drunk and naturally could tell no tales. What happened to you after you left Hackwood's camp would be an unsolved mystery, save that your canoe would probably be found floating down the river. To a man like Hackwood, who is quite devoid of any scruples, it was a simple proposition."

"Damned cold-blooded, I'd say!" Atwell growled angrily.

Shorty laughed. "Hackwood is a cold-blooded individual, son. And this is a cold-blooded country. So what can you expect?"

"Just about what I'm getting, I guess!" Atwell came back. "Just the same, I'd give a good deal to have my fingers on that man's throat right now."

"Getting cold-blooded yourself, eh?" Shorty chaffed good-naturedly.

"Well, maybe I am," the younger man laughed, suddenly grateful for the matter-of-fact calmness of his partner. "I'll have to admit that I'm trembling a little."

CHAPTER XXIX

"WELL, we've got ten days to get the boat finished and make a clean-up," Shorty remarked at breakfast the next morning. "And from the way things are going, we'll do it easy. Four or five days ought to see the bucket line begin to grind. That'll give us a run of four or five days before we clean up. Ordinarily, I'd run two weeks without cleaning up. But in this case it'll have to be shorter. We've got to make a return to the government by the sixth."

Atwell did not speak at once, surprised at the lack of interest the enterprise had come to hold for him. Shorty's words, however, recalled another matter that had been on his mind. He looked up quickly.

"That reminds me, Shorty. The governor is giving some kind of a masquerade ball on the sixth. I have been requested to come and bring you along. He said he would send us the invitations."

"The two-faced old devil!" Shorty grinned. "Wouldn't that beat you! Doing everything he can to bust us, and then asking us to his blamed ball!"

"Shall we go?"

"Sure we'll go!" Cunningham asserted promptly. "Why not? We'll have a good time. The governor's affairs are about the only things that ever break the monotony around here. He puts it on rather well, too. Lots of good eats, plenty of good drinks.

good music, pretty women. Sure we'll go. I'll rent us a couple of costumes the next time I go to town."

Atwell wanted to go to that ball. Phyllis would be there. She'd be masked, of course, but he knew with utter conviction that he would recognize her. To dance with her, to touch her, to know that she was near him—these things summarized the height of happiness to him. And yet his conscience was not entirely clear; it seemed rather unethical to accept the governor's invitation under the circumstances. He expressed the thought to Shorty.

"Get out!" the older man scoffed. "He's the one that's being unethical. If he goes ahead and invites us to his blamed party, far be it from us to turn him down. The ethical business is his lookout, not ours."

Later in the morning Phyllis and Señorita de Rico passed the camp on their way down the river. They did not stop. Neither did Atwell see them, as he was in the winch room at the time. When Shorty told him that they had gone by, he shrugged, trying to hide his disappointment. He had hoped that they would stop, that he might see Phyllis again, that he might learn something definite about the plot of the night before.

The assembling of the dredger proceeded without interruption. Atwell did the work of two men and gloried in it. Not that he was greatly interested in it—his enthusiasm for the enterprise had died, snuffed out by other problems—but hard labor was one way of keeping his mind off of Hackwood and

Phyllis Montague and the debt he owed Dolores de Rico.

The day came at last when Shorty, standing on the bow of the dredger, jubilantly gave the signal to start the bucket line. The winchman threw his controls, the winch commenced to grind and amid the cheers of the crew the endless chain of buckets began to bite into the bed of the river. Up the digging ladder went the gravel, into the revolving hopper, down to the riffle boxes, while the stacker belt at the stern set up its ceaseless din.

With the familiar roar ringing in his ears, Atwell felt a glow of enthusiasm, the first in many days.

"Lord, but it sounds good!" he exclaimed happily to Shorty.

"Don't it though?" his partner grinned. "From now on it's clean sailing. A good crew, a heavy guard till we dig our own pond where the boat'll be safe, a fortnightly clean-up of the good old stuff that looks like silver and is worth a hundred times as much. Son, they say the first million is the hardest. But we're going to show 'em that the first million is a cinch."

"Aren't you exaggerating a little, Shorty?" Atwell grinned.

"Well, maybe a little. But less than you think. This is seventy-five-cent ground, or I don't know how to prospect a placer claim. And you know what seventy-five-cent ground means. A year or two and we'll both be rich men."

Atwell turned away. Worldly wealth had come to have less significance in his life than a woman's smile.

The dredger was kept in operation day and night for four days—until Monday morning, the day before the governor's ball. Then Shorty stopped the work, called all hands onto the boat to overhaul the machinery and make adjustments—as was customary on clean-up day—and personally made the clean-up. At noon he emerged from the cottage and ran jubilantly down the trail to where Atwell was superintending the sinking of a "deadman."

"What do you think she ran?" he cried.

Atwell shook his head, smiling at his partner's enthusiasm. "I'm sure I don't know, Shorty. Ten ounces, maybe?"

"Ten! Huh! She ran thirty-nine! Yes, sir! And do you know what that amounts to? Thirty-nine ounces at the last quotation will run to better than five thousand dollars. Five thousand for four days' work. Figure it out for yourself. Thirty-five thousand a month. Knock off half for expenses. Leaves better than fifteen thousand for us. Huh! Who says the first million is the hardest?"

The following afternoon Shorty went down the river in the launch and deposited the clean-up in the bank for trans-shipment to the States, after first deducting ten per cent and turning it over to the proper officials. The concession, for the time being, was safe.

It was five in the evening when Cunningham returned to camp. He brought two large parcels with him and, as excited as a boy with his first long trousers, he called Atwell into the cottage to exhibit his purchases.

"What do you think of this, son?" he asked eagerly, opening the first package and holding up the vari-colored suit of a court jester, spangles, peaked cap and all.

"It's first rate," Atwell smiled. "Whose is the honor?"

"It's mine. I always been more or less of a fool and now for one night I'm going to play the part in earnest."

"I think," the younger man smiled ruefully, "that the costume would suit me better than it will you."

Shorty, however, was too excited to catch the note of bitterness in his partner's voice. "Wouldn't suit you at all," he said. "Too short. Wait'll you see what I got for you."

His fingers trembled as he broke the string and tore off the wrappings of the other parcel. He held the suit up, smiling proudly. It was a Robin Hood costume of forest green. "You like it, Bob?" Shorty asked eagerly.

"Very much," Atwell smiled. "I couldn't have picked a better one myself." He paused, and his face grew serious. "Say, Shorty," he began abruptly. "There isn't any danger in going down there to-night,

is there? Juartez and Hackwood are supposed to be out to get me, you know."

Shorty shrugged. "I don't think they'd try anything to-night. They'll be too busy having a good time. Still, it wouldn't do any harm to pack a gun along. You can take the one the de Rico woman had Miss Montague give you. Might even give it back to her when we're ready to leave."

Atwell nodded. "I'll do that, Shorty. I'll feel better. I'm not used to having a price on my head, and I guess it amounts to about that."

"Suit yourself, son. Now let's get cleaned up and have a bite to eat. We don't want to eat too much, though. The old governor throws a wicked feed at these parties and we might as well get our money's worth."

Under the stimulus of Shorty's good-natured bandinage, Atwell's spirits rose. It was a long time since he had attended a party. He began to look forward to it with almost as much eagerness as Shorty. The trials of the last few weeks faded into the background of his mind. The problems that he faced were forgotten—deliberately he put them aside, determined to go forth with but one end in view: to have the best possible time.

They ate lightly and repaired to Shorty's room to change into their costumes. Cunningham was voluble and excited. He talked avidly of the many people who would be there, the brilliant costumes,

the gayety, the friendliness, the abundance of good food and good drink.

"You've never seen anything like it in your life, son. The cream of the state will be there. More beautiful women—"

Shorty broke off at the sound of a low knock. He crossed the room and threw the door wide. He was confronted by a native, a very old man who leaned wearily on a long, crooked staff. Atwell had never seen a man who looked so old, so bedraggled, and so weary. His long white hair and beard were matted. His tattered clothes had been patched and repatched and drawn together until little of the original garments were left. His shoulders were hunched forward, his back was bowed in the manner characteristic to very old men.

"Well?" Shorty growled in Spanish. "What do you want?" Shorty had a way with natives of the lower class—by treating them like cattle he got along very well with them.

The old man extended a trembling hand. "Help me, I pray! I am friendless and penniless. For days I have not eaten. A few cents, sir—"

"Out you go!" Shorty broke in gruffly. "What do you mean walking in on a man this way?"

"But I am hungry, sir. A few cents—"

"Out! You belong across the river. If you must beg, beg of your own people. Do not come around bothering us."

"But, sir, I beseech—"

"Out!" Shorty pointed to the front door. Then his eyes narrowed and his hand fell to his side. "Say, how did you get up here? A man cannot travel in this country except on the river. You are not strong enough to pole a boat. What is your game, stranger?"

The old beggar blinked bewilderedly. "I am an old man. I have come far. A few cents, sir—"

Shorty Cunningham suddenly staggered backward, as though a hard fist had caught him on the point of the jaw. His eyes opened wide; he stared dazedly at the old beggar.

"Holy mackerel!" he exclaimed in English; then, awesomely: "*El presidente!*"

CHAPTER XXX

THE sight of President Juan Quilla, clothed in the rags of a beggar and standing in the doorway of their little cottage, figuratively knocked Shorty Cunningham off his feet. Beyond his first gasping exclamation, he could not find words. Atwell, too, was no less surprised than his partner. The two Americans stood motionless, mouths agape, while the president of the Republic of Andegoya strode nonchalantly into the room, closed the door and calmly removed his wig and false beard.

He was a small man, some sixty years old. His hair was white, his face was beardless. It was a likable face, however, with friendly black eyes and a generous mouth. Despite his surprise, Atwell was drawn to him immediately. Here was a man, he thought, who would go to the limit for a friend and who, at the same time, would not be ruthless toward an enemy.

The president looked from one to the other of the two Americans. Smilingly he said: "I was telling you the truth, Señor Cunningham. I have come a long way and I am very hungry. A bite to eat—"

Shorty awoke to life. He leaped to the door, dashed out of the house without a word. Atwell heard him bellowing to the cook.

"A man of action is your friend," the president remarked. "You, of course, are Señor Atwell."

The American nodded and clasped the other's outstretched hand; it was the first time had ever shaken hands with a president, even of an obscure South American republic, and he felt somewhat disconcerted for the moment. Juan Quilla, however, had a faculty for putting a stranger at his ease.

"I heard your dredger working as I came up the river," he said. "I am very glad that your work is progressing favorably. Your partner was afraid there might be trouble. I am glad there has been none." His eyes lighted suddenly as he gazed at the two costumes on the bed. "Ah, the governor's ball! You are going?"

"Yes, sir. The governor invited Cunningham and myself—for what reasons I haven't been able to figure out. I am not very keen about going, but Shorty insists, so I guess we'll take it in. And by the way, sir, I've never had a chance to thank you for that pardon. You saved my life, you know, and I am very grateful."

The president waved a deprecatory hand. "It was nothing, my friend."

"Yes, but you didn't even know me. You didn't know whether—"

"But I knew Shorty Cunningham, didn't I?" President Quilla interrupted smilingly. "I knew that no partner of his would raise a hand against me."

At this point Shorty dashed into the room. He

had recovered from his surprise by this time and shook hands with the president warmly. "The cook has gone to work and he'll have something for you in a jiffy. And how the dickens are you anyway? Say, I'm glad to see you! What are you doing down here, Juan?"

Surprised somewhat at Shorty's affable and informal manner, Atwell observed that the president replied in kind.

"Things were dull at the capital, Shorty, and I thought I would attend the governor's ball," President Quilla grinned. "You've no objections, have you?"

"Huh? Me? I should say not! But what will our friend Juartez have to say? Got an invitation?"

"Of course! It wasn't extended to me, but that makes little difference. It belonged to one José Galipados. But Señor Galipados is temporarily incapacitated to-night. In fact, he is at this moment locked in a closet in his home. I have his invitation, a costume—as you see—and I am all prepared to have a good time."

"And incidentally to use your eyes and ears!" Shorty added, grinning. "Bearding the lion in his den, eh?"

"Exactly."

"M-m. Well, more power to you! Want a couple of husky bodyguards to sort of keep their eye on you?"

"I was thinking something of the kind," President

Quilla smiled. "As you told me in your letter, and as my secret agents have informed me, trouble is brewing in the state of Condota. I do not know who is behind it—but, well, we have our suspicions, haven't we? I don't know where it will strike nor when. But I just had an idea that it wouldn't do any harm to mix around a bit with the men we suspect. That's why I am here. I came down from the capital in this disguise, traveling mostly at night. With a mask, I do not believe there is any chance of their recognizing me."

"Not a chance in the world!" Shorty agreed enthusiastically. "Didn't I stand talking to you for several minutes without tumbling, and you didn't have a mask. Juan, you're a keen one, all right. And this isn't the first time you've traveled around the country in disguise, is it?"

"No. I shall have to admit that it is a failing of mine. I got the idea from King Richard. You remember the story?"

Shorty nodded swiftly, although, as he himself would have expressed it, he didn't know any more about King Richard than he knew about the King of Siam. "The cook ought to be ready for you now," he hastily changed the subject. "Put on your beard and wig and we'll—No, that won't do. You can't eat with that soup strainer hanging over your mouth. Some folks do, but I imagine it takes a lot of practice. I'll have the cook bring the grub over here. That'll be better."

Bob Atwell felt a tingle of excitement creeping over him as he took his place in the launch at nine o'clock that night for the trip down the river to the governor's mansion. The costumes abetted it, in a way. Robin Hood, a jester and a ragged beggar were an odd combination to be seen on a tropical river, particularly when the jester and the beggar were engaged in a conversation that had to do with the making or unmaking of a nation.

There was an air of unreality about it all, as though these three characters had been conjured out of a story book. The setting, the low-hanging trees, the murky waters, the star-spattered sky, all were conducive to the illusion.

The president and Shorty talked steadily during the ride, discussing government officials, officers of the army, Andegoyan politics, rumors, conjectures, a thousand and one things that were utterly foreign to Atwell. Only once did he prick up his ears—at mention of Señorita de Rico.

"I'd like to meet her," the president was saying. "I understand she is quite a personality. An adventuress, a woman of mystery, as it were."

"Woman of mystery is right," Shorty agreed. "Even her parentage is mysterious. Real name isn't de Rico, you know. She was just adopted by the de Ricos after her parents had been split up by their families."

"Interesting," President Quilla commented.

"She has money, though, and apparently she's

backing Juartez and Hackwood," Shorty declared.

"Odd, is it not, that a woman should put up her money to overthrow me—when she has never even met me, knows nothing about me save what she has heard," the president remarked thoughtfully.

"No, it's not so odd," Shorty denied. "She's got a terrible crush on Jim Hackwood. And when a woman loses her head over a man, she'll do anything from murder up, or down. And that applies particularly to a woman like Dolores de Rico. She's as temperamental as they make 'em, high strung, hot-blooded. A good woman to look out for."

"I do not doubt it," the president said.

The talk shifted to affairs of state. The mention of Dolores had left Atwell feeling restive, however. He had not forgotten his debt to her—and he knew instinctively that she had not forgotten it. Twice she had saved his life; she had gone far out of her way, had taken a certain amount of risk to rescue him from death. Women of her type, he felt, did not take such risks merely because of sentiment. Sooner or later she would come to him and ask him to repay that debt—and Atwell dreaded the day.

At last the launch swung around a turn in the river and came in sight of the governor's mansion. Atwell's pulse quickened at the scene—it might have been taken bodily from the Arabian nights. The spacious grounds were illuminated by hundreds of colored lights, which stood out like jewels against the black depths of the forest beyond. Strings of

red, yellow and green lanterns—the Andegoyan colors—were strung across the river, shedding their varied light on the bunting-decked launches which were landing the merrymakers at the dock.

Atwell stared at the scene in awe. For sheer beauty and pretentiousness it far exceeded his expectations. The president and Shorty had become silent. They, too, were struck by the splendor of the picture.

“The old boy knows how to put on the dog, doesn’t he?” Cunningham remarked, almost reverently. “Guess we’d better put on our masks, boys. We’re almost there.” Then, more lightly, he added: “Juan, you and I had better take a good look. It’s the nearest we’ll ever come to seeing Venice.”

The jester, the beggar and Robin Hood slipped on their masks. The launch glided slowly up to the landing, edging in between other boats. Gay voices rang softly across the water, blending with the musical laughter of women and the mellow tones of a stringed orchestra on the shore.

The carnival spirit was abroad that night. Atwell felt it on every side. Mirth, laughter, gayety—his blood warmed under their subtle influence.

And yet his heart was strangely cold. Behind the merriment he sensed an atmosphere that was tense with foreboding. It was as though a great cloud hung over this festive throng, waiting only the proper time to hurl a deluge upon it. The feeling impressed itself strongly upon him. The cause? He

did not know. Many things might serve to dampen his spirits—the black mark that was still chalked against his name, his debt to Señorita de Rico, his hopeless love for Phyllis Montague.

However, it was not because of personal worries that he found a heavy feeling of melancholy coming over him as he walked slowly into the grounds. His own problems had been put out of his mind. The future could take care of itself, he had asserted again and again—to-night must be given over solely to the pursuit of pleasure.

And yet, even as he told himself these things, he knew that they were not so. Something impended. He felt it in the very air. He knew, too, that whatever it might be, it would not lead to pleasure and mirth but to pain and heartache and possibly to death.

And so it was that Robin Hood entered, not the Forest of Nottingham, but the gay coterie of knights and ladies and beggars and priests who thronged the governor's ball.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE music stopped. A hundred couples paused breathlessly. There was a wild burst of applause.

Dolores de Rico, most adorable in an auburn wig and the jewel-decked gown of Cleopatra, glanced wearily at her partner, a dashing toreador.

"I am tired, Xavier," she said. "May I rest a little while?"

Flashing black eyes, tense with excitement, regarded her through the slits in a black mask. "But, my dear! You have been here but half an hour!" Governor Juarteز expostulated. "You can hardly be tired so soon."

"It is the nervousness, I guess," Dolores responded. "To-night means—so much."

"Steady, my dear!" Juarteز cautioned in a low tone. "There are many here to-night who are not our friends. If our plans were known before eleven, they might be upset."

"Eleven?" Half fearfully she spoke the word.

"Yes. At eleven I shall give the word over the telephone to General Martinez and General Gualdo. Then," he could not hide the elation in his voice, "the festivities will begin."

The evening was warm—and yet Dolores de Rico trembled visibly.

"I am sorry," she said softly.

"Sorry? For what, my dear?" the governor asked incredulously.

"Oh," she waved her hand in a gesture of futility, "everything!"

The music struck up again. The guests began their mad whirl about the great ballroom. Dolores, however, slipped away from the outstretched arms of her partner.

"I would rather not dance," she said. "Please excuse me."

She turned her back on him, abstractedly rather than discourteously, and started toward one of the numerous balconies that opened from the ballroom. She walked with unseeing eyes, subconsciously threading her way through the maze of swaying figures in their colorful, garish costumes. A fat gentleman in doublet and hose appeared suddenly in front of her. She shook her head and slipped past him. Gaining the balcony, she found it deserted.

The scene that lay before her was uncommonly picturesque: the dimly lighted garden, the long sweep of river with its red and green and yellow lanterns, the festooned boats that crowded the landing, the strolling couples on the paths below. At another time her heart would have warmed to this colorful picture and to the spirit of gayety that was in the air. Now, however, it was heavy; the contrast between this scene and the events that were scheduled for the night was too great.

She could not think of the coming rebellion with-

out a deep feeling of regret over the part she had played in it. An adventuress, they called her. But she wasn't an adventuress, she reflected bitterly—she was just an ordinary woman who loved too deeply. She dreaded the thought of war and death and destruction. Such thoughts always sickened her and made her hate herself because her money had sanctioned such things.

If it were to be a revolution for a principle, it would be a different matter. But it was occasioned solely by greed, the greed for power on Juartez's part, the greed for wealth on the part of Hackwood. Of course, there were principles involved—the betterment of the lower classes, a more equal division of wealth, all that sort of thing. If there had not been, Juartez would never have been able to gain followers.

But Dolores knew that they were empty promises, designed merely to hide the real issues, the love of money and power on the part of the leaders. If the revolution succeeded, conditions in her country would be no better than they were—indeed, in all probability they would be worse.

She shook her head slowly. Her heart was heavy with self-reproach. Her slender hand toyed nervously with a gold necklace that adorned her lavish costume. She looked down at it bitterly. Her mother's! A mother whom she could not remember. Vaguely resentful, she told herself that things might have turned out differently if she had known a

mother and a father. The de Ricos had been good to her, of course. They had loved her like a daughter. And yet, despite the wealth and affection they had lavished on her, they had never quite taken the place of a father and a mother.

Bitterly she turned her back on the scene below her and faced the whirling dancers in the huge, dimly lighted hall. It was a successful party. Never had she witnessed such gorgeous costumes, such a festival spirit. The hall was a fanfare of color, dazzling, breath-taking with richness and splendor.

And at eleven o'clock, within a few steps of this scene and within hearing of the revelry, Xavier Juarte would take up the telephone and give the word that would plunge Andegoya into civil strife!

A couple danced near her, a man dressed as Marc Antony, a woman in the tight bodice and ruffled skirt of Little Bo Peep. Dolores' heart contracted in a wave of resentment. The girl was betrayed by her golden hair. The man, she knew, was Hackwood. They were not six feet away from her when the music stopped. They stood conversing for a time, as absorbed in one another and as oblivious to the throng around them as though they were alone.

Then, just as the music started, a man in the forest green suit of Robin Hood dashed up and claimed Little Bo Peep. Hackwood watched them glide away. Even though he was masked, Dolores could see the look of resentment that came over his face. She slipped out to his side.

"Will you dance with me, Marc Antony?" she asked lightly.

Hackwood looked at her quickly. "I do not care to dance, Dolores," he said, recognizing her instantly. "Shall we walk out on the balcony?"

Hurt at his refusal, suddenly sick at heart and weary of the whole game, she suffered herself to be led out to the balcony she had just quitted. She spoke impetuously, actuated less by reason than by her emotion:

"James, I wish to God we had never planned to do this thing! I did not want to do it. Deep in my heart I have been against it all the time. President Quilla is not an enemy of mine. I do not even know him. Why should I spend a fortune to overthrow him? Can you not do something with Xavier? Can we not call it all off?"

"Call it off!" Hackwood exclaimed. "My God, woman! What are you talking about?"

"But it is wrong! We have nothing against President Quilla. Why should we plot against him?"

Hackwood laughed softly, evidently amused at her mood. "Why, indeed! Why do you think we have engineered this thing? Because of our love for the downtrodden masses of Andegoya? I guess not! We are putting it over because we stand to make a fortune out of it."

"But it is wrong!" Dolores insisted passionately.

"What is the difference?" Hackwood shrugged. "Besides, my dear Dolores, you came into this thing

of your own free will. No one forced you into it."

Yes," she said in a low voice, standing very close to him. "Some one did force me into it."

"Who?"

"You, James."

"I?"

"Of course. If I had not loved you so much that my sense of right and wrong was obscured, I should never have done what I have."

"Love!" The man laughed softly. "This is no time to speak of love, Dolores. There are other matters, far more important—"

"Are there?" she interrupted scathingly. "I notice that they are not enough of importance to keep you from dancing with Phyllis Montague."

"That is my affair, Dolores!" Hackwood snapped.

"Is it?" she retorted. "I suppose it is not my affair that you promised to marry me more than a year ago."

Hackwood shrugged, without speaking and turned away, staring out over the river. Dolores watched him, her black eyes flashing fire. Her white hand slipped upward toward her bodice. Her form grew tense. One quick movement! A thrust of the tiny stiletto which nestled cold against her hand!

For a brief instant James Hackwood's life hung by the slenderest of threads. Then Dolores relaxed against the wall, shuddering. Her hand dropped from her bodice, empty. She raised it toward him, touched his shoulder so gently that he did not feel

the pressure. Then it fell to her side. A low sob racked her body. Hackwood swung about.

"Enough of this!" he muttered testily. "There is a meeting in the governor's private office at ten. Final details. You may come if you wish. It is on the third floor, at the far end of the hallway."

Hackwood strode off, plunged into the whirling throng and disappeared. Dolores wandered into the hall dazedly. Her world of dreams had crashed to dust at her feet. She was a woman scorned. It hurt cruelly—yet not so much as the realization that she had virtually betrayed her country for love of a man who was unworthy and unresponsive.

This was the thing that hurt. For she knew that in her right mind, with her reason unbiased by love, she would have been the last woman in the world to advance money for the financing of a rebellion. She wondered vaguely if anything could be done to set their plans at naught. But no, it was too late for that now. Only one thing could stop them; the death of James Hackwood.

Juarez was a puppet. The other leaders in the plot were just as bad. The men who were to take up arms against their country were crazed and empty-headed. James Hackwood was the real leader, the brains, the master will behind the whole plot. If he were put out of the way, even at the last minute, the whole intrigue would crumple like a house of cards.

Dolores sighed bitterly. She had had her chance.

One quick thrust of her slender stiletto and it would have been over. But her nerve had failed. However much she desired the death of a man, however much that man deserved death, she knew that she did not have the courage to kill.

Almost hopeless, yet holding some vague notion of attempting to dissuade Juarteiz and the other leaders before it would be too late, she made her slow way across the ballroom, dodging dancing couples, and at last gained the long hallway which opened onto the dance floor. Here she encountered a ragged beggar, who held out his arms as though he were about to dance with her.

Then the man stopped short, without speaking, and his hand moved slowly to the golden necklace which encircled her white throat. It was an odd necklace, being a series of tiny dancing figures, men and women, with outstretched hands that were linked together. The beggar fingered it reverently. In a hushed voice he said:

"It is most beautiful. And most strange."

The woman looked down at the tiny golden figures, touched at the odd note in the beggar's voice.

"Yes," she said softly. "It is of ancient Inca workmanship, I am told. I suppose it was found in some old ruins, high in the Andes."

The beggar nodded slowly. "Yes," he said. "I found it myself, many years ago."

"Oh, but you are joking with me!" Dolores laughed unsteadily.

"No, I am not joking," the beggar pronounced quietly. "I have made no mistake. There cannot be another like it in all the world."

"But—it belonged—to my mother. It was around my neck—when I was taken away from her."

"Yes. I know. I gave it to your mother. And I put it around your neck just before we were separated."

Dolores' breathing quickened. She felt suddenly weak. Her temples were cold. The blood was draining swiftly from her face.

"Then you—are—" she gasped brokenly, unable to finish the thought.

"Yes. I am—your father," came the halting response.

Beyond words, Dolores slowly raised her hand toward the beggar's mask. The man shook his head quickly and took a step backward.

"Not now," he said very gently. "We do not unmask until twelve. Then—I shall seek you out."

Too weak to follow, completely bewildered by the staggering revelation that had been made to her, Dolores watched dazedly while the beggar turned, walked slowly into the big ballroom and was lost among the laughing, jostling merrymakers.

Her heart palpitating wildly, her face hot and cold by turns, Dolores staggered toward the stairway that led to the third floor and the final conference of the *insurrectos*.

CHAPTER XXXII

OF the seven men who were in that small room on the third floor of the governor's mansion, the coolest was James Hackwood. High-pitched though he was, his every nerve on edge, the hand that held the telephone receiver was steady, the eyes that regarded the other men over the mouthpiece were cold and dispassionate.

It was shortly after ten o'clock. Juarteiz had nearly gone to pieces, excitement having got the better of a nerve system that was none too strong. Hackwood was giving his final instructions to General Martinez, delivering them over the private wire to Condota in a cool, steady voice.

It was a strange picture these seven men made, in their gaudy costumes. The governor, clad in the outfit of a toreador, was striding nervously up and down the room. A fat man in a black domino was pleading with him to keep calm. Two other men, a short man dressed as a seventeenth century courtier and a slender fellow in a white domino, were seated at a table, smoking furiously. The others, a monk and a pirate, were standing near the window, talking excitedly, their dark faces moist and shining with perspiration.

Hackwood hung up at last and regarded the governor narrowly. "Please sit down, Xavier," he urged. "There is nothing to get excited about.

Martinez is posting his men about the arsenal. They will be ready to attack when you give the word at eleven. The customs house is already surrounded. And not a soul suspects that anything is up. Sit down, gentlemen, and keep yourselves calm."

The pirate and the monk drew over to the table and seated themselves reluctantly. The fat man in the black domino left Juartez and sat down beside Hackwood. The governor, however, still continued to stride up and down the room. Hackwood was about to speak to him again, for the man was getting on his nerves, when a hesitant knock sounded on the door.

"Answer it, will you, Xavier," Hackwood ordered.

The governor turned the key and opened the door a few inches. Dolores, bewildered and shaken, stood in the hallway.

"Come in, come in!" the governor said nervously. Taking her arm, he ushered her into the room and locked the door again.

As Dolores removed her mask and auburn wig with trembling fingers, Hackwood scanned her narrowly. He saw that the woman was greatly wrought up and immediately wished he had not mentioned the meeting of the plotters. He detested a scene of any kind.

"Sit down, Dolores," he said gently, rising and holding a chair for her. The girl looked at him with wide, poignant eyes. He saw the loathing that was reflected in their black depths and knew immediately that he would have to take steps to pacify her. As

she sat down, Hackwood took a silver cigaret case from his pocket and opened it

"Cigaret, Dolores?" he asked, not unkindly. "It will quiet your nerves."

"Thank you, no!" she shook her head.

Hackwood was standing above her, looking down at her shining black hair and wondering how best to handle this high-strung young woman, when the telephone rang. Juartez immediately leaped toward the table.

"I shall answer it, Xavier," Hackwood said quickly, reaching for the instrument. He took off the receiver. "Hackwood speaking. . . . Yes, Galipados. . . . No, I thought you were here." There was a long pause, while the others in the room grew tense with the suspense of waiting. They had recognized that odd, rasping note in Hackwood's voice—they knew that something had gone wrong.

"Very well, Galipados," Hackwood said at last. "Thank you for letting us know." He snapped up the receiver and turned to the others.

"What is wrong? What is wrong? Where is Galipados?" the governor demanded in a high-pitched, excited voice.

"Now just keep quiet, governor," Hackwood ordered sharply. "There is nothing to get excited about. José Galipados was attacked this afternoon in his home. He was bound and gagged and locked in a closet. He escaped a short time ago and found

that his home had been ransacked. Only one thing was missing—his invitation to this ball.”

“My God! A spy!” the governor gasped.

“Very likely,” Hackwood admitted calmly. “However, there is nothing to worry about. You have had Taos keep track of your guests, have you not?”

The governor nodded quickly.

“Then order him to come here at once.”

Juarte hurriedly unlocked the door and ran into the hall. They heard him call to a servant and give an order. When he returned a moment later, the monk, the pirate and the white domino were on their feet, talking excitedly.

“My God!” the monk cried profanely. “That proves that we are under suspicion. No one would attack Galipados and steal his invitation without good cause. We are ruined!”

“Nothing of the kind!” Hackwood snapped. “You keep quiet and let me handle this thing. There is nothing to worry about—yet!”

The men lapsed into silence. The atmosphere in the little room grew tense and stifling. As she watched these men, Dolores felt her courage returning. What cowards they were! What unspeakable cowards! Worrying about their own precious skins while the poor deluded fools whom they had persuaded to join their cause were preparing to lay down their lives!

Her pulse slowed, her fevered brow cooled as a

great feeling of contempt came over her. She had detested herself; she had thought that she had sunk very low. But she, who had done wrong because her judgment had been blinded by love, could not be half so low as these filthy cowards. Her self-respect was beginning to return.

After an interval, during which the silence and the tension had become almost unbearable, there was a short knock on the door and a tall negro was admitted.

"Taos, have you kept a check on the guests this evening?" Hackwood asked.

"Yes, sir. Every one, sir."

"Did you get an invitation from Señor José Galipados?"

The big negro drew out a small notebook and thumbed its pages. "Yes, sir," he nodded. "José Galipados. Arrived at nine, sir."

"I do not care what time he arrived!" Hackwood snapped. "What did he wear?"

Taos consulted his notebook. "A beggar, sir. White beard. White hair. White mask."

Dolores leaped to her feet with a low cry. "What is that you say?"

Taos stared at her blankly.

"Read it again," Hackwood ordered, his eyes on Dolores.

The negro gazed at his notebook. "Beggar. White beard. White hair. White mask."

"Good!" Hackwood cried. "Now bring him up here. Immediately."

"Señor Galipados, sir?"

"No! The man who is masquerading as Señor Galipados. The beggar."

The negro departed hastily. As the door closed behind him, Dólores sank into her chair. She said nothing, but her eyes were very wide and staring. She was breathing swiftly now. Her fingers were closing and unclosing under the edge of the table. Exerting a mighty effort to keep her poise and self-possession, despite Hackwood's direct scrutiny, she turned to him at last, forced a smile, and said:

"I shall take that cigaret now, James."

Hackwood drew out his case obediently, snapped it open and held it out to her. Despite her efforts at self-control, her hand trembled as she took the cigaret. Hackwood did not speak until after he had held the match for her. Then he walked around the table, seated himself directly across from her and stared searchingly into her eyes. She avoided his gaze for a moment, and then met it squarely.

"Well?" she said, half defiantly.

"Why did you jump up from your seat when Taos described that beggar?" Hackwood demanded in level tones.

"What difference does it make?" the young woman parried.

"Never mind evading, Dolores!" Hackwood snapped. "What does that man mean to you?"

"Nothing!" Señorita de Rico answered promptly.

"Come, come, Dolores! Do not lie. Do you know the man?"

"I have not the least idea who he is. I danced with him a few moments ago. That is all."

"You do not know who he is?"

Hackwood's gray eyes were piercing. She met them squarely.

"I give you my word I have not the least idea who he is," she said. And because she spoke the truth, her words were convincing.

Hackwood shrugged his shoulders. "No matter. We shall know very soon, anyway."

The words were hardly spoken when the door was thrust open. The ragged beggar walked calmly into the room, the negro servant at his heels. Though the beggar was still masked, they could see his eyes move slowly around the room as he scanned each man in turn. They came to rest on Dolores, a very white, shaken señorita.

Hackwood jerked his head toward the negro. "That will be all, Taos."

The servant bowed and withdrew abruptly.

"Xavier, the lock, please!" Hackwood ordered.

The governor turned the key hastily. For a long moment Hackwood stood scanning the form of the beggar, searching him from head to heels.

"Now, sir," he began at last. "What do you mean by stealing an invitation and breaking into this party?"

"Yes! What do you mean by this?" Juarteز demanded excitedly.

"I thought I should like to attend the ball," the beggar answered. His calmness was maddening, his poise admirable. "I did not have the good fortune to be invited, so I was forced to steal an invitation."

"You were, were you?" Hackwood grunted. "All right. Who the devil are you?"

"Yes!" the governor chimed in. "Who are you?"

"I am only—" with one quick movement the beggar whipped off his mask and beard and wig—"the president of your country. And I am at your service, my dear governor."

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE room was instantly in an uproar. The monk and the fat man in the black domino dashed precipitately toward the door. Then, finding that Juarteiz had absent-mindedly pocketed the key, they faced about again, staring incredulously at the slight, mild-mannered man who was their president. The others were on their feet too. With the exception of Dolores and Hackwood, they dashed about the room like as many rats suddenly realizing that they had been trapped.

Of all those in the room, the president was by far the most calm. There was a faint smile on his lips, half contempt, half pity, as he stood watching them. Even Dolores, staggered as she was by the realization that this quiet little man, who, she had learned was her father, was none other than President Quilla, experienced a wave of pride and admiration for him.

He was trapped. She knew that. He was trapped like a sheep in a den of wolves. And yet his self-possession was perfect, while the wolves were beside themselves with panic.

Flushed of face and none too calm himself, Hackwood pounded angrily on the table.

"Sit down, you fools!" he cried. "Damn you, sit down!"

His sharp voice stayed them. One by one they

came to the table, crestfallen, disconcerted, not one daring to meet the steady dark eyes of President Quilla. Hackwood, however, met the little man's gaze with cold gray eyes in which there was a glint of steel.

"Quilla, I shall have to ask you to step into the ante room."

It was more an order than a request. Hackwood opened a door behind him, stood waiting grimly. The president hesitated only an instant. Then, his proud head high, that grim smile of contempt still on his face, he passed quietly into the adjoining room. It was little more than a closet, without a light or window. Hackwood shut the door, snapped the key, and turned back to the table.

For a long interval he stared at the conspirators, taking no pains to hide his contempt for them. When he spoke, it was as though an angry beast were snarling.

"You dirty cowards! Of all the white-livered, yellow-backed cowards I ever saw in my life, you men win the prize! What is the matter with you? What are you afraid of?" He paused. "Answer me, damn you!"

The fat man in the black domino wiped a palsied hand across his lips. "He recognized us. My God! Do you know what that means? A—firing—squad!"

"Does it?" Hackwood sneered. "And who will order that firing squad?"

"The president, of course!"

"Will he? That is where you are wrong, my friend. The president will never order a firing squad for anybody. In fact, the president will never see the light of another day."

Hackwood leaned forward over the table. His tanned face was deeply lined. His gray eyes were hard as steel, as uncompromising as death. He clenched his fist, crashed it against the table.

"Do you not see, you fools? Do you not see that we have played in luck to-night? Do you not see that the president has played right into our hands? Who is the one man who has the power to hold this country together? Who is the one man who has the power to put down this rebellion and send the whole gang of us up before a firing squad? Quilla!

"Without him, without his leadership, without his dynamic personality, where will the country be? It will be in our hands. And the struggle will not be hard and it will not be long. Think that over, you damned cowards! Think it over!"

The "damned cowards," though they had listened to him intently, were too staggered for the moment to speak. Dolores, however, was as calm as a glassy sea, as cool as a night wind. She realized that the greatest crisis of her life was approaching. She knew that she would have to fight. It was no time for hysterics now. A single misplay and everything would be lost. She marshaled her forces for the combat.

"Just what are you suggesting, James?" she asked.

Hackwood glanced at her quickly, surprised more by her obvious calmness than by her question. "What do you think I am suggesting?" he countered.

"I think you mean to kill him," the young woman surmised.

"You are right!" Hackwood snapped the words, his eyes darting about the table. Not a man but started, caught his breath, staggered by the audacity of the idea. Dolores alone remained calm and unperturbed.

"I agree with you," Señorita de Rico remarked dispassionately. "I am sorry that it had to come to this. I am sorry the president came here. But for our own protection, I am afraid it is necessary to kill him."

There was admiration in Hackwood's eyes as he looked at her. "Dolores, you have more common sense than all these men combined. You can see, what they probably cannot see, that it is his life or ours. If he goes free and this rebellion fails, we shall pay with our lives. He has seen us all. He has recognized us all. It is too late for secrecy. Failure now means death—our death. What do you say, Juarte?"

The governor's head snapped up. A coward at heart, he recognized good advice when he heard it. "I—I agree," he said brokenly, obviously shrinking from the thought of cold-blooded murder but just as obviously forced into it.

"How—can it be arranged?" the white domino asked.

"It should not be difficult," Hackwood stated. "We will wait until midnight. Then every one will be in the main ballroom to unmask. Taos will turn the trick for us. We shall leave it to him. He is quite without a conscience, as the governor will testify. The servants will carry the body outside, circle around to the river below the landing, weight it with rocks and dispose of it."

Dolores nodded coolly, certain now the course of action that lay before her. With Hackwood's first words after ordering the president into the closet, she had known that his mind was made up. She knew that it did not lie within her power to change it. She knew, too, that these other men were as willow wands in his hand. In guilelessly siding in with him, in coolly hiding her hand lay her only hope.

"What a coup!" she exclaimed. "With the president out of the way, our plans must surely succeed. As James says, he is the only one with the power to defeat us."

"And the only one with the power to execute us," Jaurtez added, shivering.

"It is agreed then?" Hackwood asked.

The others nodded, with none too much assurance. Whereas the thought of killing hundreds of the lower class had awakened not a qualm of conscience, the idea of murdering their president filled them

with dread and foreboding. Their greater dread, however, was of the firing squad—so their assent came readily.

"Very well. We shall keep him in that closet until midnight," Hackwood said. "Then I shall summon Taos and I shall personally see that he does his work properly. In the meantime, there is nothing to worry about. The door there is soundproof. Quilla does not know that he is doomed. Besides, there is no window and no way he can escape."

Hackwood drew out his watch. "It is nearly half after ten. Eleven is the zero hour. Make yourselves at home, gentlemen. And keep calm—for a change." He sat down and coolly lighted a cigaret. The others followed his example. Soon the room was so filled with smoke that the air was almost unbearable. Dolores rose and slipped on her wig and mask.

"I think I shall go downstairs," she said, most calmly. "There is nothing to keep me here and the air is really terrible. I shall come up again after—after midnight."

Hackwood's lips parted as she started toward the door. She felt his eyes upon her back. She could have screamed with the tenseness of the situation. Then his words, muttered casually: "Open the door, Xavier. You have the key."

She did not breathe again until she was in the hallway and the door had closed behind her. Then she put her hand out against the wall for support.

She felt weak, as though she were going to faint. Valiantly she fought off the dizziness, striving to get herself in hand. She walked on at last, down the stairs and into the ballroom. Her step was steady now. Her plans were crystallizing swiftly.

She watched the dancers for a moment, struck with a poignant sorrow at the incongruity of the situation. Then she dashed out among them, caught the arm of a young woman in the costume of Little Bo Peep.

"A word, please!" she said. "I am sorry to interrupt. But it is most important."

The girl followed her without a word. They went out on a balcony, where Dolores turned to her and lifted her mask for an instant. "I must find Señor Atwell," she said in English. "It is imperative. Can you tell me how he is dressed?"

The girl stared at her a moment. Then she said: "A man dressed as Robin Hood has danced with me four times to-night. I think he was Mr. Atwell."

"A green suit? A feather in his cap?"

"Yes."

"Thank you, my dear."

Dolores hurried back into the ballroom. Deliberately she walked to the raised dais on which the musicians were ensconced, mounted the three steps and scanned the throng of revelers. There was no Robin Hood among them. Her heart gave a little flutter. What if she were not able to find him? What if he had gone home?

Almost in a panic, she hurried across the floor and

out into the corridor. Then she saw him. He was in the doorway of the dining room, talking to a short man in the cap and bells of a court jester. She ran to his side, grasped his arm. He looked down at her smilingly and shook his head.

"I am very sorry," he said, "but I am not dancing."

"I do not want you to dance," she told him hurriedly, in a low voice. "I want to talk to you. I am Señorita de Rico."

"Oh!" It was a gasp, no less. He seemed to hesitate for an instant. Then he nodded. "Yes. We'll go out on one of the balconies. I need some fresh air anyway."

Dolores did not speak until they had reached one of the small balconies at the far end of the dance hall. She took off her mask and breathed deeply, staring out over the river with troubled eyes. Atwell took off his mask, too. His face was set. He looked almost fearful as though he dreaded this interview. Yet he met her gaze boldly when she turned to him. And so forlorn and troubled and perturbed did she look that his heart went out to her.

"I am going to ask you to help me, Señor Atwell," she began tremulously.

"Anything in my power, señorita," he said earnestly. "You need only command me."

"Do you mean that, señor?" she asked, clutching his arms and staring anxiously into his eyes.

"I mean it!" he affirmed. "I have not forgotten

what you have done for me. I haven't forgotten that you have twice saved my life. I am grateful. I do not need to tell you that. How may I help you?"

The young woman swallowed convulsively and her eyes fell. Her fingers clenched over the muscles of his arms.

"God forgive me!" she breathed. "I am going to ask you to kill James Hackwood!"

CHAPTER XXXIV

ROBERT ATWELL could hardly believe his ears. He had known from the first that Señorita de Rico would one day call upon him to repay his debt. But that she should ask him to kill a man—to commit cold-blooded murder—it was almost unbelievable.

"You want me to kill James Hackwood!" he repeated, in an awed voice. "My God! What a terrible thing to ask a man to do!"

"I know! I know!" she cried brokenly. "But you do not understand. You do not know that it is his life or—"

She paused, collected her thoughts and then went on more calmly. "Have you ever heard the story of my life?" she asked.

"You mean—your parentage?" Atwell asked, bewildered by this new tack.

"Yes. How I was taken away from them and adopted by the de Ricos? How I have lived in ignorance of my parents' identity all my life?"

"Yes, I have heard the story," Atwell admitted.

"To-night, I found my father. More truthfully, he found me—by this necklace I am wearing. It was my mother's. He is certain that there is no mistake. And my father is—President Quilla!"

Atwell blinked his surprise, but did not speak. Dolores rushed on impetuously.

"Right now my father is locked in a closet upstairs. At midnight, when all these merry-makers," her voice broke a bit, but she went on bravely, "are unmasking, he is to be killed. Why? Because he has discovered the identity of the men who are plotting to overthrow him. At eleven to-night the rebellion is to begin. Hackwood is leading it. Hackwood is the brains behind the whole plot. Without him, Juarteiz would never have the nerve to go through with it. He would never dare give the order to his men. Without him, there is no one who would dare order President Quilla killed.

"Do you see?" she pleaded passionately. "Do you see why he must be killed? It is to save my country! To save my father's life! Do you see, señor?"

"I see all that, yes," Atwell answered, none too steadily. "Only one thing more I do not see. I thought you loved James Hackwood."

She looked at him searchingly. Then her lips set in a thin line and her eyes flashed. "Hell hath no fury," she said cryptically, "like a woman scorned."

"So it is just a little matter of revenge," Atwell pronounced.

"No! No! No! I swear it is not that! I swear I have told you the truth! The president is here. Hackwood discovered him and locked him up. And they are going to kill him. The others were weak, but Hackwood forced them to agree. They are cowards. They are afraid of their own paltry lives."

Atwell sighed audibly, while he stared out across the river. Cold-blooded murder! He had been asked to kill a fellow man—and under such circumstance that he could not honorably refuse.

"Yes, I guess you are telling me the truth," he said at last. "The president is here. I know that because he came with us. And he has been missing for some time. My partner and I were beginning to get worried about it. You say Hackwood and his friends have taken him prisoner. Surely there is some way we can free him without stooping to murder. I am willing to help you, Señorita de Rico. And I'd like to help the president. But—I hardly—"

"Then you refuse my request?" Dolores asked scornfully.

"No. I did not say that. I merely said that we should consider every other possibility. Though, God knows, James Hackwood deserves little consideration from me."

"That is why I have come to you. That and because I have twice helped you when you were in danger."

"I know. I have been expecting you to ask me to repay you. And I have sworn that I would do it."

She took a step backward at this, staring into his eyes. "You thought—that I saved your life—so that I might some day use you?"

"Yes. I shall have to confess I did."

She turned away now, with a slow shrug of her white shoulders. "Oh, why try to keep up the pre-

tense? That was my real motive. I am an adventuress, more through environment than choice. I knew that I would some day be able to use an American, a man who could be trusted, where my own countrymen could not. Oh, it wasn't all selfishness, either. I knew that you were innocent of any wrong-doing. I knew that they were going to kill you because they were afraid you knew too much. I didn't think it was fair. So I interfered." She smiled wearily into his eyes. "There were two motives, you see. And one was just as strong as the other. Though, God knows, I never dreamed that I should be compelled to call upon you to do murder."

"But there must be some other way," Atwell insisted brokenly. "These people here—"

"Are mostly friends of the governor. They outnumber his enemies two to one."

"But we can go to town. We can get help there."

"It would be too late. Before you got there, Juarteiz would have given the word to attack the arsenal, the government buildings, the customs house. Besides, most of the officers are opposed to the president. There is no one you could appeal to. And even if you did get help, it would be too late. You could not get back before midnight.

"I have thought it all over. Oh, how I have thought! And I know that the only way we can save the president's life and prevent this terrible thing is to kill Hackwood. Without him to lead the way, there is not a man with the courage to raise a

hand against the president or the state. Oh, I know them all, señor. I know what beastly cowards they are. And I had hoped—that an American—”

“What is your plan?” Atwell broke in abruptly.

“There is a dark alcove at the back of the hallway,” Dolores went on swiftly. “I shall have word sent to him that Phyllis Montague is there, that she wants to see him. I can go to her. I can tell her that Hackwood wants to see her.”

“No!” Atwell snapped. “I will not allow her to be mixed up in this thing. She is out of it!”

“Very well,” Dolores rushed on. “We shall leave her out. I shall get Hackwood down there some other way. There are heavy hangings in the alcove. You will be concealed behind them. You will use—this.” She pressed the slender stiletto into his hand. He accepted it dazedly. “Afterward, you may slip into the ballroom. No one will ever know who was responsible.”

Atwell nodded. More than once in the last few weeks he had felt himself in the clutch of an immutable fate. He had tried to combat it and found himself helpless. Again it was pursuing him. He was caught in the same net of circumstances as had enmeshed him before. Should he fight it? Or should he succumb without a struggle, even though it meant that he must commit murder?

Swiftly he reviewed the situation, while Dolores watched him with bated breath and parted lips. Morally he was pledged to obey this young woman.

Through no volition of his own he had placed himself in her debt to such an extent that he was in honor bound to do her bidding. But, he asked himself, did that obligation bind him to murder a man? Hackwood deserved punishment—death was none too good for him. Had the man not planned to murder Atwell? Was he not now plotting to kill President Quilla in cold blood?

Thus Atwell tried to justify the deed. But even as he argued with himself, even as he told himself that such an act would merely be balancing the scales of justice, he shrank from it in bitter revolt. He was not a murderer. He could not bring himself to take a human life. Ashamed a bit at the realization, hating himself for the cowardice it implied, he faced Dolores—without the courage to tell her that he was a weakling.

“Where is the alcove you have in mind?” he demanded.

She grasped his hand with a low cry. “God, I pray that I have done the right thing!” she breathed. “Come!”

They adjusted their masks and plunged into the ballroom, crossed it and came out into the corridor on the other side. A court jester was standing idly in the doorway of the dining room. Atwell motioned to him to follow, while Dolores led him to the rear of the hallway. Turning to their right, they came into a small nook at the end of the corridor. It was draped with rich velvet hangings.

"Here! Behind those curtains!" Dolores whispered. "You have the stiletto!"

Atwell nodded abjectly, still too proud to tell her that he lacked the courage to kill a man and yet too dazed to work out any other way of handling the situation.

"I shall get him down here," Dolores de Rico told him. "I do not know how—but I shall bring him. Good luck, señor—and may God forgive us!"

She hurried down the hallway, passed a short man in the costume of a jester without seeing him, and dashed up the stairs. The jester watched her out of sight and then sauntered to the end of the corridor and into the alcove. He found a Robin Hood staring bewilderedly at a slender dagger in his hand.

"Well, son," he said casually, "what's up?"

The younger man grasped his partner with trembling fingers. "Good Lord, Shorty! What isn't up!" Tersely he sketched the situation. Shorty whistled softly when he had finished.

"H-m, looks like we're up against it," Cunningham grunted. "What you goin' to do, son?"

"What can I do?" Atwell pleaded. "Hackwood must be put out of the way—and yet—damn it all, I can't kill a man in cold blood! Not even Jim Hackwood."

"No," Shorty agreed with a nod, "I couldn't do it myself. There must be some other way. Wait a minute. Let me think."

Shorty scratched his head and took a turn or two

THE COAST OF INTRIGUE

up and down the little nook at the end of the corridor. Then, peering out into the hallway, he suddenly muttered a low curse.

"My God! Here comes Phyllis Montague!" He leaped backward toward the heavy curtains. "Come on, Bob. Get in here. Hurry! We can't let her find us here."

Following Shorty's lead, Atwell slipped behind the curtains. He was mad now. Not at fate, nor Hackwood, nor at a situation that almost forced him to do murder. He was furious at Dolores de Rico. She had double-crossed him. She had agreed that Phyllis must be kept out of the mess and then had deliberately used her as a decoy. For an instant he considered throwing up the whole affair and going home. But his loyalty to President Quilla stayed him.

Atwell, however, had no way of knowing at the moment that fate had pushed Dolores out of the prompter's box. He could not know that Señorita de Rico had returned to the little room on the third floor only to find that Hackwood had departed, ostensibly for the ballroom. He knew only that Phyllis was coming toward the rendezvous and he was a bit surprised when, through a part in the curtains, he saw her pass by the alcove.

Then he heard hurrying footsteps and a voice he recognized instantly as Hackwood's. "Phyllis, where are you going?"

He heard the girl stop and turn. "I'm sorry.

Father is not well and I don't like to leave him so long. I was just starting to get my wraps."

"Oh, but you must not go home so soon," Hackwood urged. "The party is only beginning. Please stay, Phyllis."

"But he expected me to get home early," Atwell heard the girl say falteringly.

"Step in here a moment, won't you. I have something that I must tell you, Phyllis."

The girl apparently assented, for Atwell saw them enter the alcove. Hackwood's hand was on her arm. He stood very close to her, talking so softly that Atwell could hear only a low murmur above the sounds of revelry which drifted in from the ballroom. The young man suddenly saw red. Overwrought nerves gave way. Dashing the curtains apart, he leaped out in the alcove, hurled the knife Dolores had given him to the floor, launched himself toward Hackwood.

Phyllis saw him first and uttered a low cry; it was drowned by the wild strains of the orchestra. Hackwood half turned, just in time to meet a smashing blow from Atwell's fist. It caught him squarely on the point of the chin. His arms, half raised to ward it off, slumped to his sides. His legs crumpled beneath him. He dropped to the floor, lay inert.

For a moment Atwell stood staring down at the fallen man, dazed by the swiftness of his own action. Then he heard Phyllis' voice, low, poignant with loathing:

"You contemptible beast!"

Atwell looked up at her bewilderedly. He wanted to explain, and yet knew that there was no time to go into the details of the situation. Her mask was off. Her blue eyes met his squarely, in a look of utter contempt. Atwell's gaze fell. He felt very small.

"I am sorry," he faltered. "You don't understand."

"I understand that you struck a man down from behind," she said coldly. "I think that is enough. I shall call the servants immediately." She whirled around.

"Wait! Please!" Atwell pleaded, beside himself. He stepped toward her, with outstretched hand, only to see her stop and step backward. Around the corner of the corridor came a toreador, a black revolver in his hand. The gun centered unwaveringly on Atwell's chest. The toreador halted.

"Well, Señor Atwell." The young man recognized the voice of Governor Juarte. "Suppose you throw up your hands and step out here. I do not take kindly to having my guests struck down."

Feeling suddenly weak, hating himself for the way he had hopelessly bungled the whole affair, Atwell slowly raised his hands above his head.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE governor spoke to Phyllis, though his eyes never for an instant left Atwell. "I am very sorry, Miss Montague. This is a most regrettable occurrence. I apologize humbly. I should have known better than to invite such—"

"Throw 'em up, governor!"

The words came from behind the curtains. Shorty! Atwell's heart leaped. But the next instant he realized that Shorty had no gun. Then his partner's ruse dawned upon him.

The governor's head turned involuntarily toward the curtains at the far side of the alcove. At that moment Atwell leaped forward, grasped Juarez's right hand and jerked it upward. For the moment a feeling of ruthlessness swept over him; finer instincts were swept away in a return to the primitive.

He whipped the governor's arm back, threw his weight upon it, had the satisfaction of hearing the bone snap. The arm went limp in his hand, the gun dropping noiselessly to the carpet. The governor staggered back against the wall, white as death.

Seeing Shorty leap for the gun, Atwell stepped backward and measured Juarez for a quick blow should the other attempt to make an outcry. The governor's thin lips did not open, however; a look of terror had come into his eyes as he gingerly explored

his broken arm with his left hand. Shorty was on his feet now—and he covered both Phyllis and Juar-tez with the revolver.

“Sorry to bother you, Miss Montague,” he said tersely. “But there are things going on around here that you don’t understand. From now on you’ll have to take orders from me. You, too, governor. One peep out of you and I’ll drill you straight between the eyes. Bob, there’s a closet back of those curtains there.” He prodded Hackwood’s unconscious form. “Drag that bird in and lock the door. And make it snappy, son. We haven’t got any too much time.”

Behind the curtains Atwell found a door opening into a small closet. He threw it open, dragged Hackwood into it, locked the door and pocketed the key.

“What next, Shorty?” he asked eagerly. His blood was afire now. There was a wild light in his dark eyes. The spirit of the conflict was surging through his veins.

“Upstairs,” Shorty answered promptly. “Governor, you lead the way to that little retreat of yours. If you try any tricks on us—well, you’ll never try another one. Miss Montague, please walk with the governor. And don’t make me get rough. If you hadn’t seen this affair we’d never have bothered you. But you know too much—or rather, you do not know enough—to be turned loose. All right, folks, let’s go.”

The governor hesitated, his black eyes glaring

balefully at Shorty. Then, because he read nothing but ruthless determination in the other's countenance, he turned on his heel and started toward the stairs. Bewildered and not a little frightened, Phyllis fell in beside him. Atwell's heart went out to her. It sickened him to think of forcing his will on this girl at the point of a gun. Yet he knew that Shorty had been right. It would be dangerous to let her out of their sight without a lengthy explanation, and there was no time for that.

Juarte mounted the stairs weakly, a thoroughly beaten man. Shorty had slipped his gun into his pocket; they were in sight of other guests now and it would not do to arouse the entire company. When the governor at last halted before a door on the third floor, Cunningham pushed him to one side and knocked. The door was opened at once by the black domino. The man staggered backward at the sight of the revolver. Shorty pushed the door out of his hand and stepped into the room. The others were still there, the courtier, the pirate, the monk, the white domino.

"Steady, gentlemen," Shorty ordered. "Put your hands into the air and keep them there."

Dazedly the conspirators obeyed. "Bob, search them for guns. You, Miss Montague, please come in. You, too, governor. Come in and lock the door."

Wonderingly Phyllis walked into the room. Her self-possession was returning fast; she seemed in a

measure to comprehend the situation. The governor followed her and was about to lock the door when a slender form glided into the room—Dolores de Rico.

"You have—killed him?" she questioned tensely.

"Knocked him out and locked him up," Atwell told her. "He is out of the way but far from dead."

Dolores' form relaxed; thankfulness shone in her dark eyes. "Oh! I am glad! He deserved to die—but—"

Her voice broke and the tears welled into her eyes. Phyllis was beside her in an instant, helping her to a chair beside the table. Pillowing her head in her arms, Dolores sobbed hysterically.

"All right, governor. I told you to lock that door," Shorty broke the tension. "And you, Bob, search these men."

The door was locked. The governor slumped into a chair, looking very much as though he would like to burst into tears too. Atwell searched the dazed men swiftly, found guns on the pirate and the monk and pocketed them.

"Now, who has the key to that closet?" Cunningham demanded, lowering his gun for the first time.

"Hackwood!" the black domino growled.

Shorty scowled. "Guess we'll have to break the door down. You, Bob, see if you can knock out a few panels."

Lifting a heavy chair over his shoulder, Atwell hurled it at the door with all his might. One panel

gave way with a splintering crash. Looking in, he saw the president standing calmly behind the door, smilingly unperturbed.

"Better stand back a little, sir," Atwell cautioned.

Quilla obediently stepped back to the far corner of the closet. Atwell hurled the chair again, twice, making a hole large enough for the little man to climb through. The president stood regarding the scene for several moments: Shorty and Atwell smiling elatedly; the governor and his fellow plotters crestfallen, white as death, literally trembling with fear; the two women, one calm and self-possessed, the other sobbing brokenly.

The president nodded, a slow smile playing about his lips, and addressed the two Americans. "My friends, you have done nobly. I am deeply indebted. As for these," he motioned toward the other men and his voice hardened, "an immediate trial and a firing squad will settle them."

Dolores was suddenly on her feet, dashing the tears from her eyes, speaking so swiftly in Spanish that Atwell could not catch the words. He distinguished only a few: "Eleven o'clock. . . . General Martinez and General Gualdo. . . . Was to give the word. . . . Private telephone. . . ."

President Quilla whirled on Juarte. "Governor, it is now eleven o'clock. You may go to the telephone and give the word to those traitors, Gualdo and Martinez—that you and Hackwood and the rest of your fine friends are captured, that there will be

no rebellion, and that if they are in the country tomorrow morning they will be captured and shot."

Juarteiz stared at the President, blinking dazedly.

"Go!" Quilla snapped, motioning toward the telephone on the table.

Juarteiz got to his feet, staggering like a drunken man, and slumped down at the table. He took up the receiver and spoke briefly into the mouthpiece, delivering the message exactly as the president had ordered.

"Now, governor, where is your other telephone, the one connected to the main exchange?" Quilla demanded.

Juarteiz motioned, without speaking, to a small stand in one corner of the room. On it was another telephone. The president took up the receiver, announced his identity to the operator and ordered an immediate connection with the Condota arsenal. He spoke tersely for a few moments and then hung up and swung about.

"A squad of soldiers is leaving immediately in a speed boat," he announced. "They will be here in half an hour. Cunningham, if you will be so kind as to guard these men, I shall go downstairs and make a brief announcement to the governor's guests. I imagine he'd just as soon they were not here when he is led away in handcuffs."

"We are at your service, sir," Shorty grinned delightedly, twirling his revolver.

"I shall be back immediately the guests are gone," Quilla said, starting toward the door.

He had reached it and was in the act of turning the key when there came a mighty crash and the door seemed to leap backward off its hinges. A huge negro catapulted into the room and fell headlong on the broken door. Behind him stood Hackwood, a leveled revolver in his hand, a look of insensate fury on his face.

"Damn you!" he cried wrathfully. "It is my turn now. Throw up your hands!"

CHAPTER XXXVI

SHORTY CUNNINGHAM was not a killer; at heart he was a gentle man, kindly, sympathetic, tender-hearted. Yet he was blessed with a quick perception and a lightning hand. He saw the situation in one instantaneous burst of understanding. He realized that it was Hackwood's life or his own and those of his two friends, President Quilla and Atwell.

The order had hardly left Hackwood's lips when Shorty's gun swept upward in a movement so swift that it caught the other off his guard for the fraction of a second. It was long enough to make the odds even. The two guns spoke as one, shattering the gripping silence like a peal of thunder. Dolores screamed hysterically. Some one cursed.

Like a felled tree, tall, straight, immobile, Hackwood pitched forward on his face. Dolores was the first to reach his side. Sobbing, she raised his head. A little gasp went up from the others. Shorty's bullet had found its mark squarely in the center of the forehead. The señorita raised her eyes appealingly.

"God forgive me!" she pleaded. "It is I who have done this terrible thing!"

Then she fell prostrate across Hackwood's body.

Unscathed and not in the least excited, Shorty

took command of the situation. He aimed a kick at the negro servant, who still crouched bewilderedly on the broken door.

"Carry that woman across the hall and put her on one of the beds," he ordered. "Miss Montague, you might go along. There may be something you can do for her. Juartez, you and your gang get over in the far corner of the room. One false step and I'll let daylight through you. Move!"

The music below had stopped at the sound of the shots. There was an excited babble in the corridors, the sound of footsteps on the stairs. As the plotters moved hesitantly toward the corner of the room, Shorty spoke to the president.

"You'd better meet them at the top of the stairs. Tell them as much as you think best and send them home. Atwell and I will take care of these men until the soldiers get here."

Half an hour passed. The guests departed. The silence of death crept over the big house. Then President Quilla returned with his soldiers to the room on the third floor. The body of Hackwood was carried out. Juartez and his compatriots were herded downstairs and into launches. Atwell and Cunningham breathed freely at last.

Downstairs in the deserted ballroom they met the president. Though the little man was still calm and unruffled, the weight of tragedy rested heavily on his shoulders.

"Words mean nothing at a time like this," he

said. "I can only express the hope that I may some day have the opportunity of squaring accounts with you."

"You think the country is out of danger, do you?" Shorty asked.

"Certainly. Without leaders, what can they do? Hackwood is dead. The others will be dead as soon as a jury and a firing squad can do their duty."

Atwell stammered a question. "What—will become of—Señorita de Rico?"

The president bowed his white head. He spoke brokenly, as though deeply hurt. "She shall not be harmed. I shall see to that if it costs me my office. She has plotted against the state, I know. But she has more than made up for it by what she has done to-night. I am going to her now."

The president shook hands warmly with his two friends, bade them good night, and strode out of the silent ballroom. Cunningham faced his partner, smiling ruefully.

"Well, son, it's a hell of an ending for a party, isn't it? If I'd thought anything like this was coming off, I'd certainly stayed home. Oh, well, I guess we did some good after all. Let's go into the dining room and get a bite to eat. It's all spread out there and I'm half starved. Then we'll shove off for home."

Atwell shook his head. "No, Shorty. I'm not hungry. I'll meet you down at the boat. The way I feel now, I can't get out of this house too soon."

"Suit yourself, Bob. I'll be with you in a few minutes."

Cunningham hurried across the hallway to the dining room. Atwell strolled out onto the broad veranda, down the steps and along the walk which led down to the boat landing. The soldiers and their prisoners had departed behind the last of the guests. The grounds were deserted.

The events of the night had left Atwell's brain numbed. He walked as one in a daze. The colored lights which had been hung in the gardens were still burning. The river, too, was a blaze of red and yellow and green. Like a physical blow were these silent reminders of an interrupted revelry, a comedy turned suddenly to tragedy. Atwell was saddened by the scene; it left his heart strangely empty.

He had almost reached the launch when he heard swift footsteps on the walk behind him. They were too fast to be Shorty's, too light for any man. He swung around. Phyllis was running toward him. The ruffles of her full skirt were wrinkled and soiled. Her white face was streaked with tears. She halted before him, a bit breathlessly, her eyes avoiding his. Dully Atwell asked:

"Is she feeling better?"

"Yes. Much better. Her father is with her." The girl's voice was unsteady; still she failed to meet Atwell's eyes.

"I am glad of that," the young man murmured.

"It has been a hard night for her—for all of us, for that matter."

Phyllis met his eyes then. Her hand reached out, clasped his with fingers that trembled.

"Can you ever forgive me?" she pleaded, the tears welling into her eyes. "I have done you such a terrible injustice! Señorita de Rico has been talking. She has told me everything. I have wronged you. Please—please forgive me!"

For a long, unforgettable moment their eyes met. Atwell was swept off his feet on a wave of emotion. Then his hungry arms reached out and drew her to him. Her lips met his without resistance. He held her close for a long time—until he heard the scuffling of feet on the walk. He looked up into Shorty's blinking, incredulous eyes.

"Shorty," he smiled, blushing furiously, "if you'll be real good, I'll let you drive Phyllis and me home in the launch. And you may drive slowly, Shorty, for we have much to say to each other."

Shorty saluted, grinning broadly. "Very good, sir. You'll find me the slowest chauffeur and the deafest chauffeur this side of the Canal. The royal barge awaits, sir."

THE END





